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**BONNIE PRINCE CHARLIE**  
SCOTTISH SUPERHERO OR POMPOUS COWARD?



# HISTORY

MAGAZINE

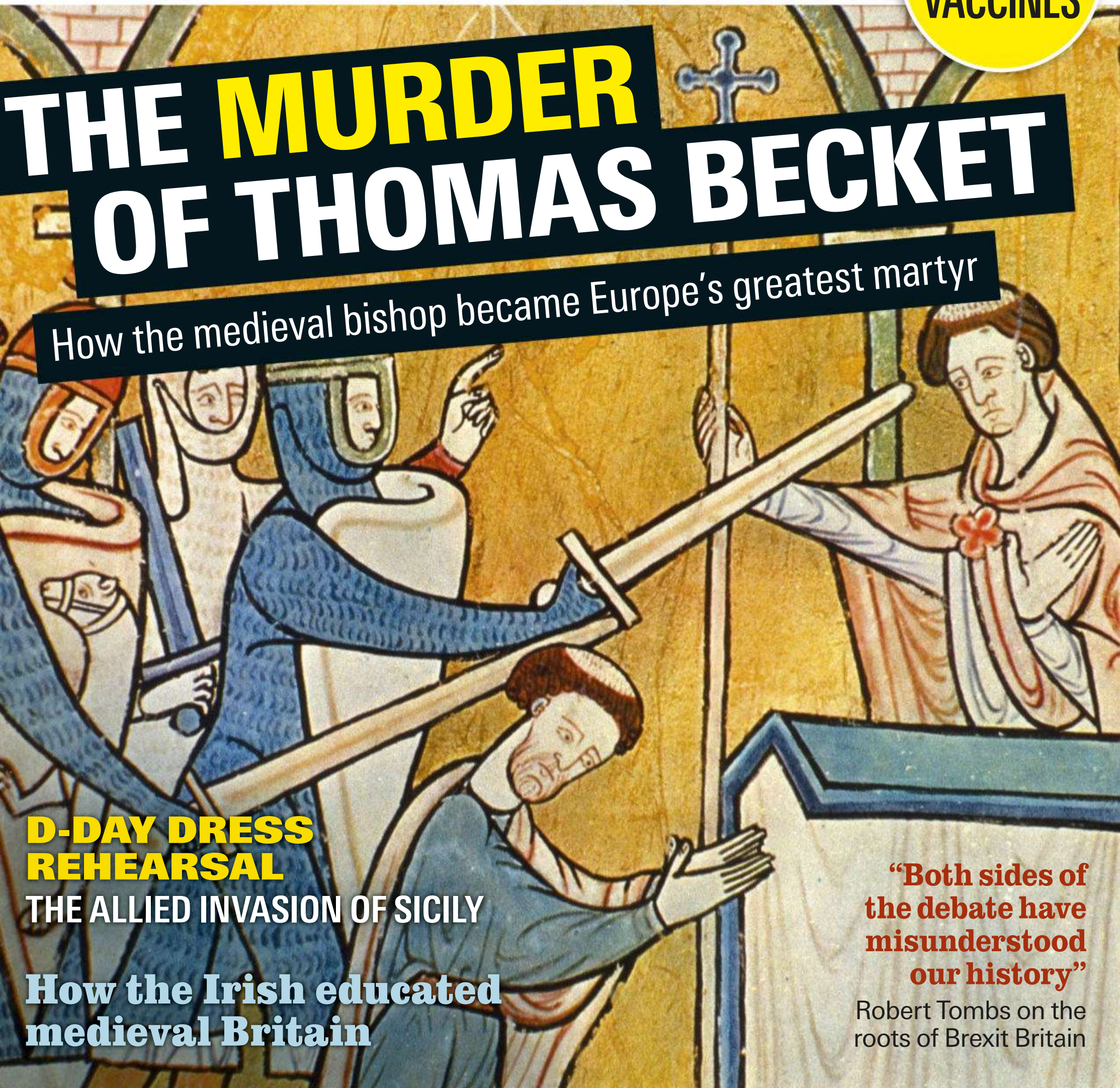
**BRITAIN'S BESTSELLING HISTORY MAGAZINE**

January 2021 / [www.historyextra.com](http://www.historyextra.com)

THE  
REMARKABLE  
HISTORY OF  
**VACCINES**

## THE **MURDER** OF THOMAS BECKET

How the medieval bishop became Europe's greatest martyr



**D-DAY DRESS  
REHEARSAL**

THE ALLIED INVASION OF SICILY

**How the Irish educated  
medieval Britain**

**“Both sides of  
the debate have  
misunderstood  
our history”**

Robert Tombs on the  
roots of Brexit Britain

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# WELCOME

JANUARY 2021

“Happy new year to all our readers. For many of you, I suspect, 2021 can't have come quickly enough, and one reason for optimism about the coming year is the promising news regarding several Covid-19 vaccines. It's a remarkable scientific achievement, but not, of course, the first time that deadly diseases have been fought in this way. On page 38, Gareth Williams looks back at the **race to inoculate us against smallpox, polio, TB and rabies**, revealing the human stories behind these dramatic breakthroughs.

Although overshadowed by the pandemic, **Brexit** has not gone away, and the transition process is due to have ended by the start of 2021. In our books interview on page 76, Robert Tombs discusses the **roots of Britain's departure from the EU** and argues that history has not always been deployed wisely in the Brexit debate. Look out too for **Michael Wood's column** (page 13) on a post-Brexit England.

Heading further back in time, our cover feature (page 20) explores the **murder of Thomas Becket**, which took place 850 years ago. As Emily Guerry explains, the assassins might have ended Becket's life, but his slaying created a martyr of unparalleled power.

And there's plenty more to get your teeth into this month, from James Holland on the **1943 invasion of Sicily**, to Kavita Puri on **South Asians in 1990s Britain** and Jacqueline Riding on the conflicting reputation of **Bonnie Prince Charlie** on his 300th birthday.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

**Rob Attar**  
Editor



## THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS



### Emily Guerry

The central place of Saint Thomas Becket – as a rebel, martyr and healer – in medieval visual culture fascinates me, and I am particularly interested in the iconography of his martyrdom in Gothic art.

**Emily delves into the cult that sprouted around the archbishop after his murder on page 20**



### James Holland

I travelled extensively around Sicily to research my book. It's a beautiful island but with a roughness and toughness to it, and even today I find myself marvelling at how difficult a place it must have been for those fighting there in 1943.

**James argues the invasion of Sicily should be celebrated, not criticised on page 50**



### Kavita Puri

Racism was much less overt than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, but if you were growing up in places like Oldham and had the far right agitating, then it was very real.

**Kavita explores the experiences of South Asians in Britain during the 1990s and beyond on page 45**

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MAGAZINE

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**POST** Subscriptions & back issues  
*BBC History Magazine*, PO Box 3320, 3 Queensbridge, Northampton, NN4 7BF. Basic annual subscription rates: UK: £48, Eire/Europe: £67, ROW: £69

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PO Box 37495, Boone, IA 50037  
[BHlcustserv@cdsfulfillment.com](mailto:BHlcustserv@cdsfulfillment.com),  
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Superhero or coward? Jacqueline Riding finds the man behind the myth

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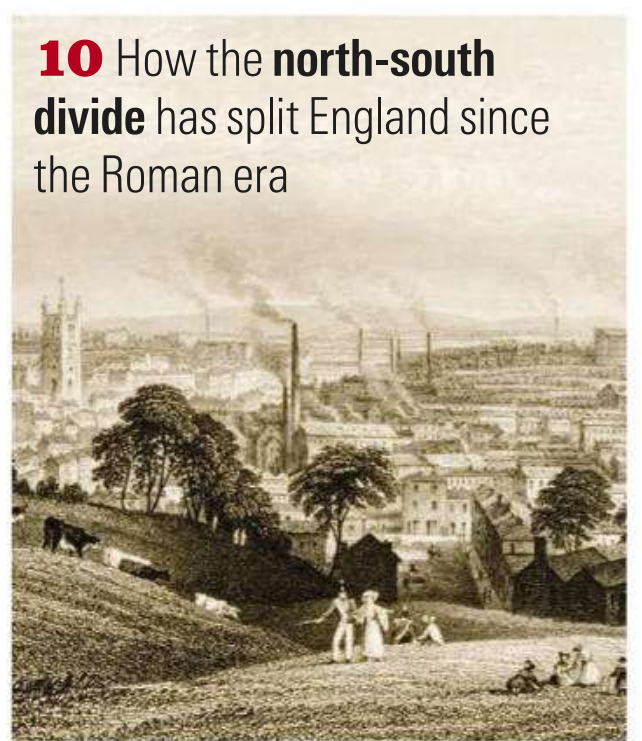
Fergal Keane charts the influence Ireland historically wielded over Britain



To read about the race to develop vaccines for smallpox, TB, rabies and polio, turn to page 38



45 The nineties was a golden age for **British South Asians** – but then the bubble burst



GETTY IMAGES/BRIDGEMAN



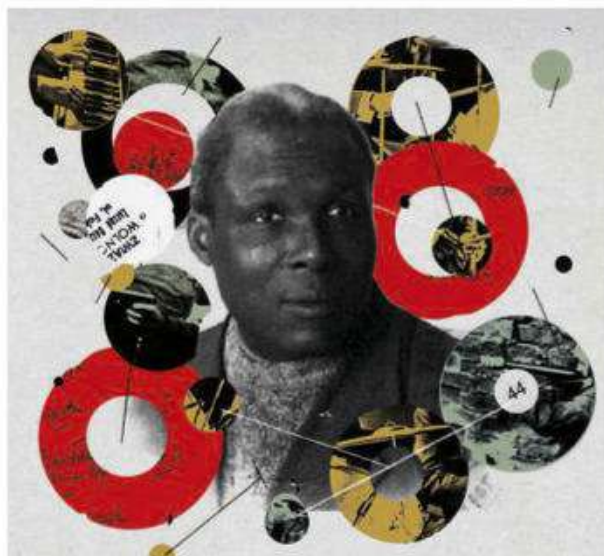
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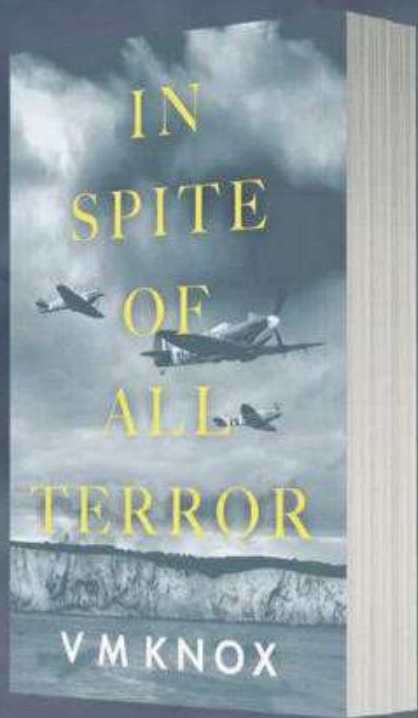
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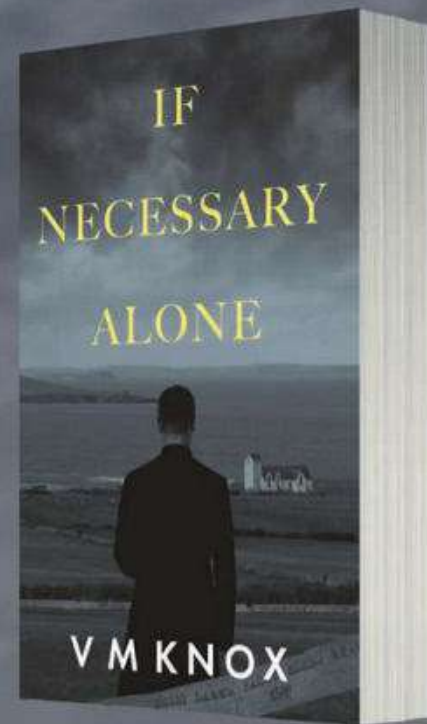


**USPS Identification Statement** BBC HISTORY (ISSN 1469-8552)  
(USPS 024-177) January 2021 is published 13 times a year under licence from  
BBC Studios by Immediate Media Co Bristol Ltd, Eagle House, Colston Avenue,  
Bristol BS1 4ST, UK. Distributed in the US by Circulation Specialists, Inc.,  
2 Corporate Drive, Suite 945, Shelton CT 06484-6238. Periodicals postage paid  
at Shelton, CT and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address  
changes to BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE, PO Box 37495, Boone, IA 50037-0495.

# Intrigue, Murder, Revenge and Embedded Nazi Spies



*In Spite of All Terror* is the first in a series of crime thrillers by V M Knox that mix historical fact, crime fiction and superb characterisation. Set in September 1940, when Britain stood alone against an imminent Nazi invasion, Reverend Clement Wisdom and other men from the restricted occupations, were called to join the covert Auxiliary Units. Following the murders of several of Clement's team, he finds himself embroiled in the murky world of espionage where things are never what they seem.



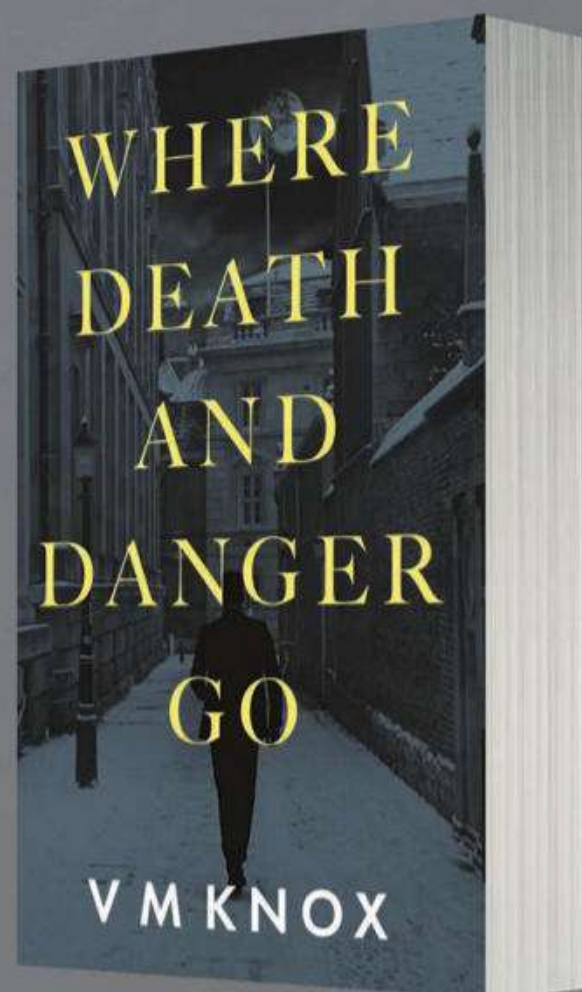
*If Necessary Alone* is the second thriller in this World War II crime series. Clement Wisdom, now a Major in Special Duties Branch, Secret Intelligence Service, is sent to remote Caithness to investigate illicit encrypted radio transmissions. As soon as he arrives there, an out-station wireless operator is found brutally murdered and Clement becomes entangled in a web of death and silence. Alone, and in the bitter Scottish winter, Clement must stay one step ahead of a killer if he is to remain alive.

*Where Death and Danger Go* is the third book in this World War II crime series. Set in the dark days of 1941, Britain fights on alone. Fear hangs in the air. Some yearn for peace and an end to the relentless Nazi bombing. Others are spurred on to fight. And some will manipulate a divided country for their own ends.

On a winter's night, a German spy parachutes into Cambridgeshire while another man is secretly murdered in the same field. Is he another enemy spy or has he been sent to his death? Either way, a killer lurks.

Major Clement Wisdom of Special Duties Branch of the SIS is sent to discover the dead man's identity and uncovers a sinister network of conspiracy where kidnap, murder and revenge threaten not only the safety of the nation but also Clement's life.

Released 5th November 2020



**All three books can be purchased from online book sellers, Waterstones and independent book shops.**

## EYE-OPENER

### Monumental decision

The A303 currently runs past the site of Stonehenge in Wiltshire – a course that looks set to be reshaped due to a government decision in November. The road will be turned into a dual-carriageway tunnel running underneath the monument, boosting the size of what is a major route to and from the south-west of England.

The decision was made by the Department of Transport despite the Planning Inspectorate warning of “permanent, irreversible harm” to the site. However, the UK government insisted that “the secretary of state is satisfied that, on balance, the need case for the development together with the other benefits identified outweigh any harm”.

# TALKING POINTS

## Rewriting history?



The row about how heritage bodies tackle contentious episodes of the past rumbles on, with an open letter penned by MPs sparking much debate. **ANNA WHITELOCK** watched it unfold

The phrases ‘National Trust’ and ‘woke agenda’ may not often be sighted in the same sentence, but the latter was the charge of 28 MPs who wrote to *The Daily Telegraph* in November in response to the Trust’s new report into its properties’ colonial histories. The MPs were particularly incensed that the report “implicitly tarnished one of Britain’s greatest sons [Churchill] by linking his family home, Chartwell, with slavery and colonialism”. They also criticised the decision of the National Maritime Museum, in light of the Black Lives Matter protests, to portray “multiple perspectives on history” and thus review Nelson’s “heroic status”. History must not, the letter concluded, “be sanitised nor rewritten to suit ‘snowflake’ preoccupations”. Cue the Twitterstorm.

In the words of **Greg Jenner** (@greg\_jenner): “That’s LITERALLY what history is, lads. History isn’t the past! It’s how we interpret the past. That’s why, amazingly enough, people keep writing new history books.” **Andrew Johnson** (@andyjey) tweeted: “I’m baffled as to why people are so afraid of history. It’s not rewriting history, it’s telling history. Is their identity really so bound up in British exceptionalism they need to keep history sanitised?” Meanwhile, **Charlie Baxter** (@CharliePLBaxter) mused on “the irony... that the National Trust are

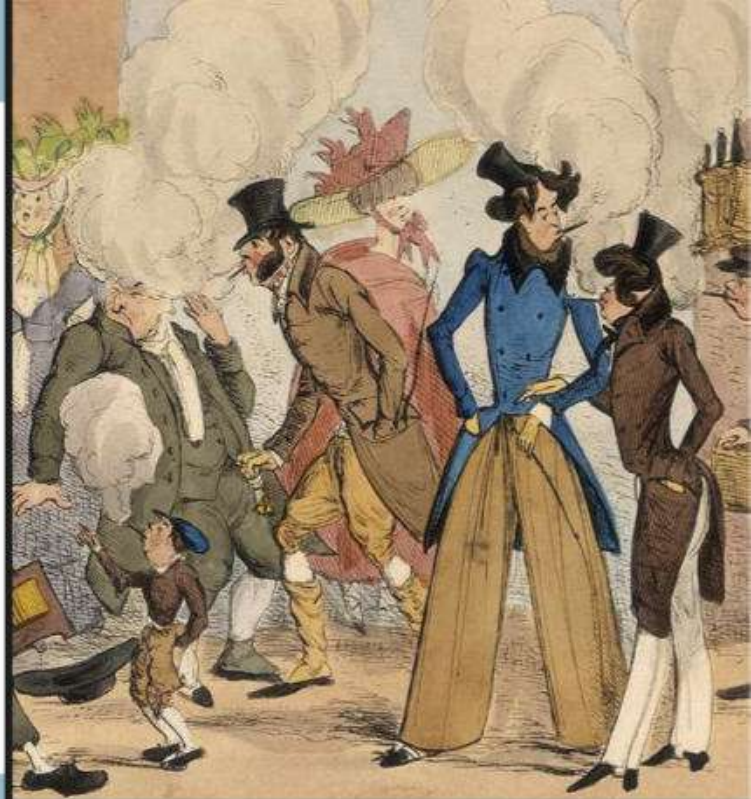
doing the opposite of sanitising history [and are] instead drawing attention to the parts of British history that often don’t get taught”.

**Cavan Scott** (@cavanscott) made the same point and added, in relation to what the National Trust is doing, “it’s telling the full story and letting people make up their own minds. This, in my view, is progress.”

Not all agreed, however. **Brendan Quantock** (@BrendanQuantock) wrote: “It’s a pity that [the National Trust] doesn’t stick to its job of preserving the buildings and landscapes in their care rather than massaging history to emphasise a ‘woke’ view of the past.” **Sally Webster** (@Sallywebster) tweeted: “Thank goodness for Conservative MPs with common sense, who aren’t afraid to stand up to the National Trust and point out that they’re wrong.” But **Stephen Bush** (@stephenkb) of the *New Statesman* attempted to change the weather, arguing that “the report does exactly what its critics are asking the National Trust do. There is no ‘oh, and this was bad’... The homes and collections of abolitionists and of slavers are treated in exactly the same way.” **Benjie Fowler** (@benjiefowler) concurred: “I had the same response when I read the report – it was only the ‘however’ in the last line of the Chartwell entry [“however, Churchill opposed the granting of Dominion status to India”] which could cause any consternation, but that surely isn’t deserving of the level of fuss this has generated.” So just the proverbial storm? We shall see. **H**

**// History isn’t the past, it’s how we interpret it. That’s why people keep writing history books //**

Chartwell, Churchill’s Kent home. Its colonial links have been at the heart of debates about how the National Trust tackles such topics



Men puff cigars in an 1827 satirical image. A project will capture smells our ancestors would have experienced

### SOCIAL

## Project aims to make scents of the past

It’s one of the great historical questions – what aromas would hit your nostrils if you could step out of a time machine in, say, 16th-century London? Time travel may still be outside of our grasp, but a new project aims to offer the next best thing: to identify and recreate the smells our forebears might have experienced.

The three-year ‘Odeuropa’ initiative will see historians join forces with scientists and artificial-intelligence experts to scour archive texts and images created between the 16th and 20th centuries for references to scents. They will then explore the context in which they were found, the kinds of people who noticed them and the reactions they provoked. As well as creating an online olfactory encyclopedia, they will also work with perfumers to recreate these smells and explore how they might enhance our understanding of the past.

The project’s sweeping timespan means that it will also allow researchers to investigate the ways in which the meaning of particular odours changed throughout history. Dr William Tullett, one of the members of the project, pointed to tobacco as an example of an aroma whose meaning shifted dramatically over time. “It’s a commodity that was introduced into Europe in the 16th century that started off as being a very exotic kind of smell, but then quickly became domesticated and became part of the normal ‘smell-scape’ of lots of European towns,” he said. “Once we get into the 18th century, people were complaining actively about the use of tobacco in theatres.” **H**

# HISTORY IN THE NEWS

A selection of the stories hitting the **history headlines**

## Van Gogh experienced ‘delirium after alcohol withdrawal’

Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh is famous both for his influential artistic masterpieces and his experience of mental health issues – and now new research may offer fresh insights into his psychological state.

Experts analysed van Gogh’s medical records and hundreds of his letters, and interviewed three historians specialising in the artist. They believe that the findings point to the artist having experienced two episodes of delirium – a sudden state of mental confusion – in the final years of his life. These may have been caused in part by enforced withdrawal from alcohol, upon which van Gogh was increasingly dependent, after he was admitted to hospital following his mutilation of his ear in 1888.

This alcohol consumption may also have exacerbated a psychological disorder that van Gogh had experienced since his youth. However, the authors of the study, published in the *International Journal of Bipolar Disorders*, caution that more work on their subject is necessary – and that his mental health needs to be seen as just part of his wider life and personality.



An 1889 van Gogh self-portrait showing his bandaged ear. A new study explores the artist’s mental health

## HS2 dig reveals ‘witch marks’

Medieval graffiti found in the remains of a church in the Buckinghamshire parish of Stoke Mandeville may have been created to ward off evil spirits, experts suggest. The marks, found etched into stones in the ruined church, likely date from the 12th century, and it’s thought their designs were believed to trap sinister forces in an infinitely looping pattern or maze. It’s among the discoveries made as work continues on Britain’s new high-speed HS2 rail line, which is set to begin operation from 2029.



The ‘witch marks’ feature lines radiating from a central hole and may have been made to protect against dark forces

## End of Stone Age saw monumental building boom

The final years of the Neolithic period were marked by intense building activity and the construction of several large monuments in Britain, a new study suggests. Analysis of a henge at Mount Pleasant in Dorset reveals that it took between 35 and 125 years to build, rather than centuries, as previously thought. Experts posit that the effort may have been sparked by a sense that times were changing.



The henge at Mount Pleasant being excavated in the 1970s. New research suggests it was built quickly

## First settlers in North America ‘used dog hair for clothing’

Finding a landscape devoid of animals to domesticate, the first humans to arrive in North America bred the dogs that travelled with them from Eurasia – for hunting, for labour and, most often, for fur. That’s a theory suggested by a study of 170,000 canine bones found in the north-west of North America, most of which appear to have come from a type similar to a spitz. Its fur may have been spun into yarn for use in clothing, experts suggest. **H**



Dogs, possibly similar to the one pictured here, may have provided fur for early settlers of North America



An archaeologist cleans one of the statues found in excavation work at a huge necropolis near Cairo

## Egypt reveals trove of coffins

Almost 100 well-preserved sarcophagi have been unearthed in a vast necropolis near Cairo, Egyptian antiquities authorities have announced. Discoveries include an intact mummy still wrapped in cloth, and scores of gilded statues, with the artefacts thought to date back as far as the seventh century BC. It’s the latest set of finds to be made in the area, where 59 wooden coffins were located earlier in 2020 – and more will be revealed in the coming weeks, according to Egypt’s tourism and antiquities minister.

## The north-south divide

The disproportionate impact of coronavirus on cities such as Liverpool and Manchester has raised fresh concerns about England's regional inequalities. **DAN JACKSON** explores how geography and identity have shaped prosperity over the centuries

**T**he news that the north has been hit harder than the rest of England during the coronavirus pandemic – with a higher mortality rate than the south, and the exacerbation of adverse trends in poverty, education, employment and mental health – as well as the recent gains made by the Conservatives in Labour's traditional 'Red Wall' seats, has rekindled interest in the seemingly age-old north-south divide in English politics.

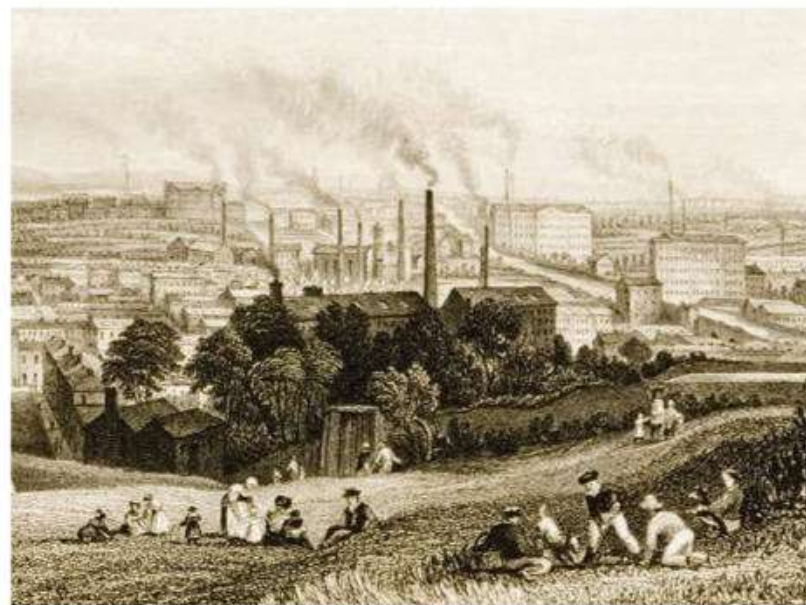
It was probably the Romans who first divided England on a north-south axis. Under the emperor Septimius Severus in AD 197, a plan was conceived to improve the administration of this new province – and subdue the native Britons – by splitting it in two. But by naming the southern portion 'Britannia Superior' (Upper Britain) with its capital at Londinium (London), and its northern counterpart 'Britannia Inferior' (Lower Britain), with the capital at Eboracum (York), the Romans unknowingly shaped our understanding of what is important and what is peripheral in English history.

The western boundary between these two provinces partly followed the line of Watling Street, an ancient route adopted by Roman engineers, that ran diagonally north-west from Dover through London and up to Wroxeter in Shropshire. But this Roman road was more than just a transport link: it marked the central watershed of England, too, with all the rivers north-east of Watling Street flowing into the Irish Sea or the North Sea, whereas those to the south and west flowed into the Severn or the Thames. The boundary also came to have political significance, becoming the frontier laid out in a treaty between King Alfred and the Viking leader Guthrum in the ninth

century that settled the south-western limits of the Danelaw – those parts of England subject to Danish rule.

Although Watling Street still remains a useful way to delineate the south of England from the Midlands, and lives on through the popular conception of the 'Watford Gap' between the hills of Northamptonshire (through which the route passes), it is actually another topographical boundary further north that has had a more durable impact on English history.

**// The topographical curtain was only permeable in a few places: Daniel Defoe likened crossing the river Trent to crossing the Rubicon //**



**Rise and fall** A 19th-century lithograph depicting the cotton mills of Stockport, which today forms part of Greater Manchester. The industrial revolution brought prosperity to the north, but it wasn't to last

During the medieval period, the heart of England was considered to be London and the wide and fertile southern plain, bounded in the west by the rivers Exe and Severn, and in the north by the river Trent and a fringe of marshes, hills and high moorland that stretched from the 'mosses' of south Lancashire, the peaks of Derbyshire, the great forest of Sherwood, and the marshes of the Isle of Axholme and the Humber. This topographical curtain was only permeable in a few places; indeed, when the writer Daniel Defoe later travelled through Britain in the 1720s, he likened crossing the Trent to crossing the Rubicon.

From this division of north and south, England still retains the ecclesiastical provinces of Canterbury and York, as well as the jurisdiction of the two royal heralds, Clarenceaux and Norroy (a corruption of 'Nord Roi', meaning 'North King'), in the College of Arms. Even Shakespeare has his rebels in *Henry IV, Part I* plotting to carve up the land along these lines, with Mortimer taking "England... south and east of Trent and Severn"; Glendower seizing Wales; and Harry Hotspur being left with "the remainder northward, lying off from Trent".

The north was well defined by its geology, too, initially by the ridge of Jurassic limestone that runs through England and separates an upland zone more suited to pastoral agriculture than the low-lying and more fertile plains of the south. What began to redress this imbalance, however, was another geological quirk: the vast mineral deposits of coal, iron, lead and copper under the north of England, which – alongside the plentiful sources of water power and damp climate that provided ideal conditions for the spinning of cotton – accelerated an industrial revolution. For the first time, the north of England became rich.



### Line of duty

Residents queue outside a Covid-19 testing centre in Liverpool. The city, which has been heavily affected by the virus, was recently selected to pilot a mass-testing programme

While the surviving architectural glories of Victorian Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle serve as a reminder of the confidence and prosperity of the north during this period, its industrial pre-eminence was not to last, and a sense of decline and former glory still hangs over many towns and cities today.

But what has persisted down the centuries is a feeling of ‘difference’ between northerners and southerners. Much of this notion appears to rely on hard-to-prove stereotypes about northern warmth and southern froideur. Yet as early as the eighth century, the Venerable Bede stressed a distinction between the two groups while writing his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (‘Ecclesiastical History of the English People’).

Similarly, what’s striking about English migration to North America from the 17th century is how northerners and southerners went their separate ways. Whereas the Puritans from East Anglia built communities in New England and the Anglican ‘Cavaliers’ colonised the Virginia valley, the so-called ‘Borderers’ from northern England (whose mixing with the Scots-Irish people has since obscured their English roots) went about settling the wild Appalachian back-country instead.

### A northern uprising?

To this day the split between north and south is perhaps most obvious in the English language itself, with shorter vowel sounds in the north (a flat ‘bath’ instead of ‘barth’ for example), as well as lexical differences – such as the term for the main evening meal, where ‘dinner’ is most entrenched in the home counties, while by contrast, those in Greater Manchester, Tyne and Wear and Merseyside are most likely to say ‘tea’.

The political implications of the north-south division have been a litany of defeats for the northerners stretching

back to the Norman ‘Harrying of the North’ in the 11th century, to the slaughter of the Lancastrians in the snow at Towton in 1461 by Edward IV’s largely southern army, and the doomed Catholic rebellions of the north against the Tudor monarchs in 1536 and 1569. The civil war, too, had a north-south dimension, with the king’s support concentrated in the north and west of England, while parliament controlled most of the wealthy south and east, and, crucially, London itself.

This rivalry would then find further cultural-political expression in the 18th and 19th centuries with the growth of nonconformist Christianity in the north of England, which in turn did so much to inspire the Chartist and Labour movements that challenged the dominance of the south. It’s perhaps no wonder that George III never travelled further north than Worcester during his entire 59-year reign, and Queen Victoria reputedly had the blinds closed on the royal train as it crossed the coally Tyne en route to Balmoral.

As so often, the south of England saw off all these threats, and the economic and political power it amassed during the 20th century still seems unassailable. Yet, something might be stirring. Greater Manchester has emerged as a centre of resistance to the Conservative government’s handling of the ongoing pandemic, and there is even an active Northern Independence Party on social media agitating for the lands north of the Humber to secede from England.

With the devolved parliaments in both Edinburgh and Cardiff becoming increasingly assertive, how long will it be before northern England – whose population is almost twice that of Scotland and Wales combined – finds its voice once again? **H**

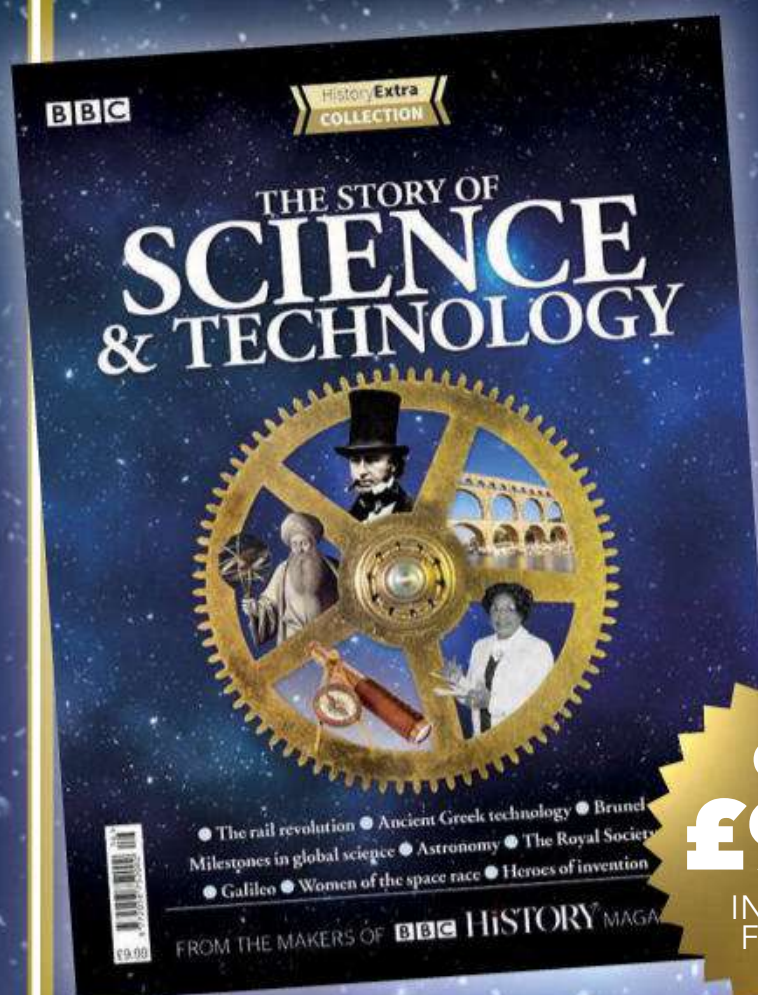


**Dan Jackson** is the bestselling author of *The Northumbrians: North-East England and its People – A New History* (Hurst Publishers, 2019)

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**MICHAEL WOOD ON...**  
POST-BREXIT ENGLAND

## // We need to talk about England. What kind of nation will it be? //

I've put this one off, I'll be honest. After all, it's been building up for quite a while. But on 1 January 2021 we finally leave the European Union. How will

historians see this moment? Too early to tell, you will rightly say, but historians taking the long view are already telling us that Brexit was the product not only of the divisions of the last 10 years or so, but was rooted in Britain's 20th-century experience of empire: the biggest fact in the last 300 years of British history.

Often in history the precursors are not evident until the events actually unfold. Only then you see the signs were there all along. On the heels of victory in 1945 came Indian independence and the swift end of empire, Commonwealth immigration in the fifties, and massive deindustrialisation. Out of all this was born the corrosive identity politics that (it is surely uncontroversial to say now) led to the Brexit vote. Future historians will draw their picture from acts of government; Hansard (the official report of parliamentary debates); popular books and movies; newspaper files, especially the rightwing broadsheets and tabloids that have dominated the discourse; and from TV and radio archives too – noting, for example, that broadcasters' misplaced idea of 'balance' led to a failure to interrogate not only the facts but also the fantasies. For journalists as well as historians, after all, the truth is not some midpoint between a fact and a lie.

And now anxious commentators tell us the postwar consensus is finally broken, the government unable to express the values of our history and society – that sense

of a shared past – in a way that is satisfying to the majority of the nation. Is that how it felt at the end of the Roman empire, one wonders? Should we recall Symmachus's letter protesting the Christian emperor Gratian's removal of the pagan altar of victory from the Roman Senate? Or the philosopher Boethius, who in the late Roman culture wars turned not to Christianity, as so many did, but to paganism? Like us perhaps, to their surprise they saw they had become a different people.

The independence movements, especially in Scotland, have run in parallel. From its creation in 1707 the United Kingdom thrived as the empire rose and flourished. Enough of the people got enough out of it to support the status quo of the imperial class, the financiers, entrepreneurs and landowners (who, after all, are still in place). The UK's nations grew and were sustained by their colonies and the vast trade routes that brought wealth and the people of the world here – so long as that huge web of enterprise and exploitation remained in place. In a single century Britain saw a fourfold growth in population. We Britons were turned into a new people.

And at the heart was England – the core state of the Union and the key to the 2016 vote. "England expects," said Nelson's signal flags; "There'll always be an England," sang Vera Lynn; "This is England: this is how we FEEL!" roared The Clash. But what is England now? What of that extraordinary history of culture and invention, whose greatest gifts to the world were its language and literature (not given freely and without coercion, I concede, but now so useful and so enriching because everyone adopted them, along with many other innovations)? Big gifts from a small country. But is England now really no longer able to reinvent itself? Now that Brexit has happened, if Scotland goes, if Ireland is united, what will remain? A century on from the point when the empire reached its widest extent, Kipling's fires on headlands really will have burned away.

So to coin a phrase, we need to talk about England. How we understand and reimagine England will be a key to the future. For example, a recent poll says 90 per cent of people think you don't have to be white to be English any more. So will it be the English nation described by Wulfstan Cantor a thousand years ago, a place of "many different languages, costumes and customs"? Or an inward-looking England no longer sure what its past really means? History is always the product of the living; it is made up of our choices. We rethink, we rewrite, to meet the needs of our present. As I have often said in this column, history is never fixed; it's always in the making, never made. And now in 2021 we are again turning into a new people. **H**

➤ Turn to page 76 for Robert Tombs' take on the **tangled roots of Brexit**, as he traces Britain's historical relationship with Europe

ILLUSTRATION BY FEMKE DE JONG

### Michael Wood

is professor of public history at the University of Manchester. He has presented numerous BBC series and his latest book is *The Story of China* (Simon & Schuster, 2020). His Twitter handle is @mayavision



# ANNIVERSARIES

**DOMINIC SANDBROOK** highlights events that took place in January in history

**24 JANUARY AD 41**

## Claudius becomes emperor

*The sickly scholar is invited to rule Rome in his nephew's place*

When the Roman aristocrat Tiberius Claudius Nero Germanicus, better known simply as Claudius, awoke on 24 January AD 41, he never imagined he would end the day as emperor. His nephew Caligula, in charge for almost four years, was still a young man. A sickly, scholarly figure, Claudius was 50 years old and had never been seen as a serious political figure. There seemed no reason for that to change.

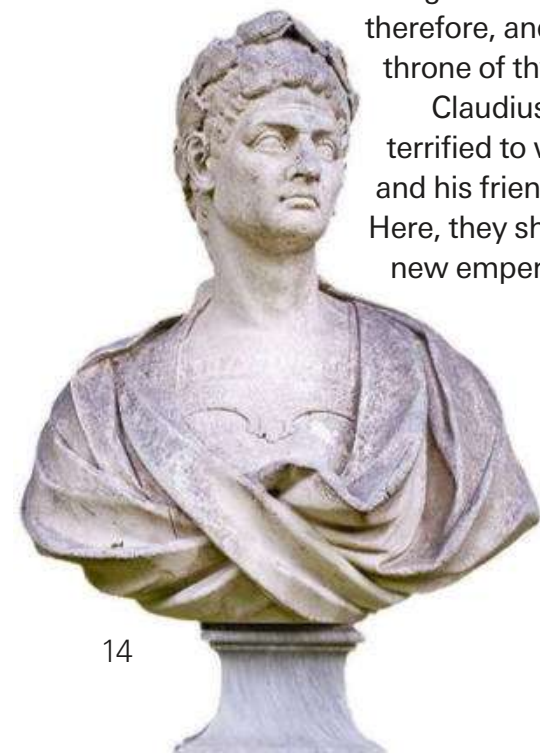
And then, suddenly, everything was thrown into flux. During the Palatine Games, which were held to honour his ancestor Augustus, Caligula was murdered by the Praetorian Guard. The conspirators hoped – among other aims – to restore senatorial rule, but in the meantime, Caligula's German bodyguards rampaged through the palace.

Claudius ran for his life. "In great terror at the news of the murder," wrote the biographer Suetonius, "he stole away to a balcony hard by and hid among the curtains which hung before the door." But there he was spotted by a soldier called Gratus – and for a moment, it seemed that his luck had run out.

Gibbering in fear, Claudius begged for mercy. But according to the historian Josephus, "Gratus smiled upon him, and took him by the right hand, and said: 'Leave off, sir, these low thoughts of saving yourself, while you ought to have greater thoughts, even of obtaining the empire... Go to,

therefore, and accept the throne of thy ancestors.'"

Claudius was still too terrified to walk, so Gratus and his friends carried him. Here, they shouted, was their new emperor.



A bust of Claudius, who was made emperor following his nephew's murder

The gorse-covered hill at Dinas Oleu in Barmouth, north-west Wales. This was the first site to come into the possession of the National Trust in March 1895, and its natural delights have been enjoyed by the public ever since



ALAMY

King Æthelred (shown on a 14th-century genealogical roll) and his brother Alfred survived the Danes' fury at Reading



#### 4 JANUARY 871

After Danish forces invade the kingdom of Wessex, King Æthelred and his brother Alfred catch up with them at Reading. The Danes burst out of the town, taking the duo by surprise. But **Æthelred and Alfred manage to get away**, rallying their forces for battles to come.

#### 12 JANUARY 1895

## The National Trust is founded

*Reformers create an organisation that makes nature accessible to all*

There were no cheering crowds in London on 12 January 1895. Nor were there any scones, decorative tea towels or family-friendly toilets. Even so, this was a big day for the National Trust: the day it was founded.

The National Trust was rooted deep in the soil of Victorian Britain. The key figure was Octavia Hill (pictured below), a high-minded reformer who had long believed that working people should have access to "the life-enhancing virtues of pure earth, clean air and blue sky". Back in 1876 she had helped her sister Miranda found a Society for the Diffusion of Beauty, which campaigned for open spaces to "bring beauty home to the poor". "We all want quiet," she explained, "a few acres where the hill top enables the Londoner to rise above the smoke, to feel a refreshing air for a little time and to see the sun setting in coloured glory which abounds so in the Earth God made."

At the same time, Hill was working with her friend Hardwicke Rawnsley, an Anglican clergyman, and the solicitor Sir Robert Hunter to protect the Lake District from quarrying in the fells. At the end of 1893, the three of them met at the office of the Commons Preservation Society, Britain's oldest conservation group, to discuss a new trust specifically to buy sites for the nation as a whole. Back in 1885, Hill had proposed calling it the Commons and Gardens Trust. But Hunter suggested a simpler name: the National Trust.

The Trust's founding in January 1895 occasioned little comment. But two months later it would make its first acquisition, the gorse-covered hillside at Dinas Oleu, overlooking Cardigan Bay. "I have long wanted to secure for the public for ever the enjoyment of Dinas Oleu," explained the landowner, Fanny Talbot, "but wish to put it to the custody of some society that will never vulgarise it, or prevent wild nature from having its way... and it appears to me that your association has been born in the nick of time."





### 16 JANUARY 1647

The 16-year-old **Grand Prince Ivan of Muscovy** is crowned **Tsar of All the Russias**, the first Muscovite ruler to assume the imperial title. But western histories remember him by his bloodcurdling nickname: Ivan the Terrible.



A cartoon referencing the so-called Doctors' Plot in the satirical Soviet magazine *Krokodil*. In reality, the 1953 conspiracy was a fabrication created by Stalin himself

### 13 JANUARY 1953

## Stalin orchestrates the Doctors' Plot

*The dictator stokes up an anti-Semitic fantasy to fever pitch*

**I**t was 13 January 1953, and the Soviet paper *Pravda* led with a bombshell. "Today," it declared grimly, "the [state] TASS news agency reported the arrest of a group of saboteur-doctors. This terrorist group, uncovered some time ago by organs of state security, had as their goal shortening the lives of leaders of the Soviet Union by means of medical sabotage."

According to the authorities, a group of Kremlin doctors had murdered several senior Soviet officials, among them Josef Stalin's

close comrade Andrei Zhdanov. "Whom did these monsters serve?" asked the paper. "Who directed the criminal, terrorist, and harmful activity of these vicious traitors?"

The answer, apparently, was an unholy alliance of "corrupt Jewish bourgeois nationalists" and foreign spies. The paper alleged that the majority had been "recruited by a branch-office of American intelligence – the international Jewish bourgeois-nationalist organisation called 'Joint'. The filthy face of this Zionist spy organisation, covering up their

vicious actions under the mask of kindness, is now completely revealed."

So began the saga of the so-called Doctors' Plot, an anti-Semitic fantasy of Stalin's own imagining. Over the next few weeks, hundreds of doctors, many of them Jewish, were arrested. Why Stalin did it remains uncertain. Anti-Semitism had deep roots in the Soviet Union, and he seems to have considered mass deportations of Jews to camps in the Soviet east. But it also conformed to a pattern. Stalin was always on the lookout for international conspiracies, and he regularly liked to purge the Communist party of supposed traitors.

But fate was on the doctors' side. In March the dictator unexpectedly died, and the charges quickly disappeared. As his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, told the party congress three years later, the whole thing had been "fabricated... set up by Stalin".



Steve Jobs introduces the iPhone in San Francisco. The product changed the face of technology forever

**9 JANUARY 2007**

## Steve Jobs unveils the first iPhone

*Apple's announcement takes the world by storm*

**T**hank you for coming," said the thin, bespectacled man in the black polo neck and Levi's jeans. "We're going to make some history together today."

For weeks there had been intense speculation about what Apple's chief executive, Steve Jobs, was planning. There was talk of a new computer, even a mobile phone. So when thousands of Apple enthusiasts poured into San Francisco's Moscone Center, the atmosphere was already electric.

At last it was time for the new product to be revealed. "This is a day I've been looking forward to for two and a half years," he said. "Every once in a while, a revolutionary product comes along that changes everything... Well, today, we are introducing three revolutionary products."

These were, he said, "a widescreen iPod with touch controls", a "revolutionary mobile phone", and a "breakthrough internet communications device". "An iPod, a phone, and an internet communicator," he repeated. "An iPod, a phone... are you getting it? These are not three separate devices. This is one device, and we are calling it... iPhone."

It was a brilliant set-up, and the crowd were on their feet, cheering and hollering. As Jobs spoke, Apple's stock soared. And the iPhone proved an even bigger success than he imagined. After nine years, sales had hit 1 billion, and other companies had launched imitations of their own. Life in 2021 would be very different without it. **H**

**Dominic Sandbrook** co-presents the weekly podcast *The Rest is History* with historian Tom Holland, available on all platforms

# WHY WE SHOULD REMEMBER...

## The unification of Germany brings a new empire into being

BY MARK HEWITSON

**One hundred and fifty years ago**, on 18 January 1871, the German empire was proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. In one official depiction of the event, painted by Anton von Werner in 1885 (shown below), Otto von Bismarck, the Prussian minister-president and future German chancellor, stands at the centre of the picture looking up at Wilhelm I, the new emperor, and ignoring the dignitaries behind him. Eight years earlier, in Werner's first portrayal of the scene, Bismarck had been far less conspicuous, merging with a crowd of onlookers.

The debate over Bismarck's role in the unification of Germany – above all, his orchestration of a series of popular wars, which excluded Austria from German politics in 1866 and assured south German support for unification in 1870–71 – continues to dominate historical discussions of unification. But there were many other factors, from the actions of other ministers and monarchs to the instabilities in Europe's states system at the time, that helped pave the way for unification.

Before the German empire was created, 39 states had been joined together in the German Confederation. During the 1860s, public opinion and party leaders in these states had advocated replacing the confederation with a unified empire. In 1849 liberals and democrats across the confederation had voted – by 267 votes to 263 – for a Reich constitution that would unify a "small Germany" under a Prussian "Kaiser of the Germans". This idea remained relevant, as liberals began to push for the creation of a German nation-state after 1858 – the same liberals who viewed Bismarck as a marginal ultra-reactionary and "shallow country squire".

Not everyone shared this vision.

The strongest opposition came from the south German states, especially Bavaria. Yet the choices confronting southern leaders were limited, not least because an independent "Confederation of the South" seemed unlikely, and Bismarck's war-mongering, along with popular support for war, meant they were forced to accept unification, for lack of a better option. So with their opposition quashed, unification finally came to pass in 1871.

German unification absorbed the last territories of the buffer zone which had existed at the heart of the Concert of Europe (the loose agreement among European powers to preserve the territorial and political status quo), moving the centre of gravity of the new nation-state towards the south and west. The annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871 created an enduring Franco-German enmity and reinforced the connection between war and the nation, which again became visible during the First World War, the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and the fall of France in 1940. **H**

**// The debate over Bismarck's role in unification continues to dominate historical discussions //**



Anton von Werner's 1885 painting of Kaiser Wilhelm I's proclamation ceremony gave Otto von Bismarck (centre, in white) a more prominent position than earlier artworks



**Mark Hewitson** is the author of *Germany and the Modern World, 1880–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)



Tintern Abbey in Monmouthshire, one of the sites managed by Cadw – whose praises are sung by reader Clare Kenney

## LETTER OF THE MONTH

### Estates of denial?

Regarding Corinne Fowler's feature *The Colonial Secrets of Britain's Stately Homes* (December), as well as letters and comments I've read on the subject, there's something I'd like to say. As a history graduate who is as passionate about studying academically as I am about enjoying public history, I am often deeply upset at the attitudes of some regarding our colonial links. I also often ask myself why so many people seem to be so angry about sharing the full depths of the histories of stately homes.

I wholeheartedly agree with Fowler's thoughts and found it particularly interesting that her previous research revealed a common objection that "the past is the past". History is not what happened, but how we *interpret* what happened. This is how and why so many new books, academic articles and even TV documentaries are written and made each year. How boring it would be if we truly believed that 'the past is the past' and never investigated or interpreted anything ever again!

So why should this be different for how we conduct public history and share the full picture within stately homes? I particularly loved the end of the article, in which Fowler discussed children who find this kind of history interesting. Let's be honest and open about the histories of stately homes, and share the full picture of all of the events and objects within them to encourage interest, growth and better understanding of our past.

**Holly Froggatt**, Derbyshire



We reward the *Letter of the Month* writer with a copy of a new history book. This issue, that is **The Japanese: A History in Twenty Lives** by Christopher Harding. You can read our review of the book on page 80

### A dangerous obsession

I enjoyed Alec Ryrie's feature on Britain's obsession with the Second World War (*Our Dangerous Devotion to the Second World War*, Christmas) – and an 'obsession' it most certainly is. In 2015, I was working for BBC News when it televised commemoration services of the funeral, 50 years earlier, of Sir Winston Churchill. It included sailing the very boat [the *Havengore*] that carried his coffin up the Thames five decades earlier along the river again. The coverage led the lunchtime news.

None of my British colleagues thought this odd. I asked a friend from BBC World Service if he could think of another country that would restage part of a leader's funeral 50 years on and cover it so lavishly. "North Korea?" he suggested.

It is all but impossible to get through a day in the UK without seeing or hearing some historical or cultural reference to the war, overt or otherwise. By 8am this morning, I had counted three in *The Times*.

Does this matter? I would say that it feeds a deep national conviction that Britain has always been a 'good' country, because of its role in defeating Nazism, and makes it harder to examine, soberly and honestly, parts of the past that may not fit with that image – colonialism being the obvious current example.

**Marek Prusiewicz**, Buckinghamshire

### A path to the past

Alison Fell's feature (*Welcome Guests?*, November) suggests there are very few traces of the Belgian refugees who came to Britain during the First World War. It might be of interest to readers that there is a walk alongside the Menai Straits in Anglesey called the Belgian Promenade. It was built during the First World War as a thank you to the local people for the welcome the refugees received. It's about two-tenths of a mile in length and is a very popular and beautiful walk, with the Menai Suspension Bridge to one side and the Britannia Bridge to the other.

**Mervyn Jones**, Llanfairpwllgwyngyll

### Comprehensive teaching

I would like to thank Julie Rowney for her response (*Letters*, December) to my letter (November) about history teaching in the UK. It is great that these discussions and debates are happening.

To summarise, Tom Knight made a comment on Twitter that history teaching in schools shows only the positives of empire. I argued that, as history teachers, we also

look at the negatives. Julie Rowney added that we need to let pupils make their own judgment based on the evidence.

This was my point. By teaching the positives and negatives of an event or topic, we can allow pupils to create their own opinion based on the evidence. We must remember, however, that nobody is completely objective.

**Matt Smith**, Kent

### Behind the times?

In a letter in the Christmas issue, Pam Blair suggested that our heritage bodies should merge. The letter did not, however, mention Cadw (pronounced Cadu), which works to provide an accessible and well-protected historic environment for Wales and manages 121 sites around the country. Membership is inexpensive and immediately grants free entry to Manx National Heritage as well, and after a year, members receive free entry to Historic Scotland and English Heritage properties, too.

We have had Cadw family membership for seven years, since moving to Wales, and have taken advantage of the free entry to other properties on numerous occasions, including Osborne House and Stonehenge.

**Clare Kenney**, Newport

### Erasing history

Richard Ovenden's *Burning the Books* (reviewed by Michael Wood, December) lists many of the atrocities suffered by the world's libraries either accidentally or as the result of deliberate barbarism during conflicts and natural disasters throughout the centuries.

Books are, of course, by no means unique victims. History tells us of lands conquered, peoples enslaved and imprisoned, treasures



One of the Bamiyan Buddhas, whose 2001 destruction by the Taliban is lamented by reader Ian MacDonald

ALAMY



The boat that carried Churchill's coffin in 1965 sails up the Thames in 2015 to mark 50 years since his death. It's just one example of Britain's continuing obsession with the Second World War, argues reader Marek Pruszwicz

looted, religions, languages and beliefs suppressed and monuments such as the Bamiyan Buddhas [in Afghanistan] destroyed – all the result of human greed, the collateral damage of war, or a deliberate attempt to ethnically cleanse a people's culture and impose one's own beliefs. The loss of so many books and documents has been just one consequence of all this violence.

How ironic, then, that even in times of relative peace, so many countries have banned, censored and challenged works of literature with which they disagree, usually justifying their actions on political, legal, religious or moral grounds. Even when military conflict and natural disasters do not destroy books, we restrict access to those we take exception to.

**Ian MacDonald**, Essex

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## EDITORIAL

**Editor** Rob Attar [robertattar@historyextra.com](mailto:robertattar@historyextra.com)

**Deputy editor** Matt Elton [mattelton@historyextra.com](mailto:mattelton@historyextra.com)

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**Classified sales executive**

Sarah Luscombe 0117 300 8530

[Sarah.Luscombe@immediate.co.uk](mailto:Sarah.Luscombe@immediate.co.uk)

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[buckley@buckleypell.com](mailto:buckley@buckleypell.com)

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[Emma.Cooney@immediate.co.uk](mailto:Emma.Cooney@immediate.co.uk)

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**IMMEDIATE MEDIA**

Vol 22 No 1 – January 2021

*BBC History Magazine* is published by Immediate Media Company Bristol Limited under licence from BBC Studios who help fund new BBC programmes.

*BBC History Magazine* was established to publish authoritative history, written by leading experts, in an accessible and attractive format. We seek to maintain the high journalistic standards traditionally associated with the BBC.

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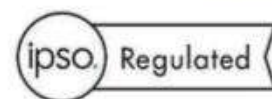
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See page 60 for details



# How Thomas Becket





# rose from the dead

The “meddlesome priest” exerted an extraordinary hold over king and country during his lifetime. But, writes **Emily Guerry**, that was nothing compared to the power he wielded from beyond the grave

**O**n 29 December 1170, four of King Henry II’s knights murdered Archbishop Thomas Becket inside Canterbury Cathedral, scattering his blood and brains across the pavement. The killing, 850 years ago, marked the end of one of the most brilliant, divisive careers of England’s Middle Ages. Yet, in many ways, it was also a beginning.

News of Becket’s killing spread quickly and, in a matter of months, he had been transformed into one of the most famous martyrs in Christian history. Becket was canonised a mere three years after his death, while, within a decade, Canterbury monks had recorded 703 miracles related to the slain archbishop, and tens of thousands of visitors had flocked to the cathedral to venerate his remains. Supported by the circulation of new liturgies, miracle stories, sacred objects and holy relics, the cult of Becket soon dominated the landscape of Christendom, from Trondheim to Tarsus and Rochester to Reykjavik.

As we mark the anniversary of Becket’s

killing, there’s never been a better time to explore his extraordinary life – and afterlife; to ask ourselves how a merchant’s son born in Cheapside nine centuries ago can, today, still draw thousands of pilgrims to the site of his death and burial.

Due in part to the sensational story of this death – and the swift process of his canonisation – historians today know more detail about Becket (from his dietary habits to his mood-swings) than perhaps any other English person who lived during the Middle Ages.

Thomas Becket was born in c1120, on the feast day of the Apostle Thomas (21 December), to a merchant named Gilbert Becket and his wife, Matilda. He studied in London and Paris, returned to England with a number of powerful social connections, and, by 1145, he had entered the household of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury. Becket quickly became one of the prelate’s favourites, and he often helped with important negotiations, including those concerning the royal family and their ongoing dynastic disputes.

Soon after the coronation of Henry II on 19 December 1154, the new king appointed

## Death becomes him

LEFT: Four knights hack Thomas Becket to death, as depicted in a circa late 12th-century illumination. Within a decade, tens of thousands of visitors had flocked to Canterbury to venerate the remains of the archbishop

TOP RIGHT: Christendom remained under Becket’s spell for centuries, as evidenced by this 15th-century pendant



the trustworthy and capable Becket as his royal chancellor. The two men became close friends, and although Becket was still technically Henry's servant, the king showered him with gifts: Becket wore the finest clothes at court, he travelled with a dazzling entourage, and he had unobstructed access to the royal treasury.

For those who would go on to write biographies of Becket, the flashy outward appearance of the future saint was mere performance. This truly ascetic man, they suggested, was just biding his time, pretending in splendour.

After the death of Theobald, Henry championed the appointment of Becket to the vacant see (seat of authority) of Canterbury, and he was consecrated on 3 June 1162. In his new capacity as the highest-ranking prelate in the kingdom and a 'vicar of Christ', Becket now claimed a direct authority from God and the pope, totally independent and separate from the Plantagenet crown. From that day onwards, the relationship between the royal master and his former servant would be forever changed – and highly strained.

Within a year, the two most powerful men living in the British Isles entered into aggressive, public conflicts over ecclesiastical jurisdiction. To enforce obedience, Henry presided over the Council of Clarendon in January 1164 and demanded Becket's loyalty, claiming that he (not the church) had the authority to punish criminal clerks. Becket refused to concede. Before long, Henry used his royal power to strip Becket of land and money, and Becket used his ecclesiastical power to excommunicate the king's closest friends and supporters. Later that same year, as relations between archbishop and king deteriorated further, Becket left for France, where he spent six years in exile, living at Sens and Pontigny. He returned to Canterbury in December 1170.

### **Grim recollections**

Five eyewitness accounts of Becket's martyrdom survive, and each of these biographers (or rather hagiographers) paints a dramatic portrait of his gruesome death. The most influential version of events was written by an injured bystander named Edward Grim, a clerk from Cambridge who nearly lost an arm during the assault.

Just days before, four knights – Reginald FitzUrse, William de Tracy, Hugh de Morville and Richard le Bret – had crossed the English Channel together, after staying with the king at Bur-le-Roi in Normandy for Christmas. They had overheard Henry II voicing his frustration with Becket, and it is from this explosion of royal resentment that the colloquial phrase (of spurious origin):

**Bitter exit**  
A 13th-century manuscript shows two scenes from Thomas Becket's life. **RIGHT: Becket (right, on horseback) takes his leave of Henry II and Louis VII of France in 1169...**



**LEFT: As Becket (second left) prepares to sail from France to England, Milo, an agent of the count of Boulogne, warns him that the coasts are closely guarded by the king's forces**

## **Henry used his power to strip Becket of land and money; Becket used his to excommunicate the king's allies**

"Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" derives [see box page 26].

The knights evidently interpreted the king's outcry as a directive and hastened to Canterbury, arriving at the cathedral on 29 December. They entered the precincts in the late afternoon, confronted Becket in his archiepiscopal palace, and tried (but failed) to arrest him without force. They then rushed out and returned with weapons.

In the meantime, the Canterbury monks encouraged Becket to take sanctuary inside of the cathedral (some of the sources report that he had to be dragged there) while Vespers was taking place; the monks were singing and (as it was Christmas) the townspeople were present for prayer. It would have

been around 4 o'clock in the afternoon, a time of darkness in the Kentish winter, and they proceeded from the archiepiscopal palace along the monastic cloister into the north transept. It was here that Becket – dressed in black robes – took his final footsteps.

Moments later, the conspirators charged through the church door, now wearing armour and carrying swords. Grim reports that they cried out: "Where is Thomas Becket, traitor to the king and the kingdom?" They were now joined by a subdeacon named Hugh of Horsea, who would be remembered as 'Mauclerk' for the nasty part he played in the murder. The choir and people fell silent, and Becket proclaimed: "Here I am. Not a traitor to the king, but a priest," emerging from a pillar situated between the altars dedicated to the Virgin Mary and Saint Benedict.

The assailants now hurled threats at the archbishop and manhandled him, attempting to remove him from the church. Becket clung to the column. In the midst of this, the archbishop called FitzUrse a pimp, an insult that infuriated the knight, who drew his sword. Knowing that the hour of his death was at hand, Becket composed himself, bowing his head and praying.

FitzUrse struck at Becket's head and sliced open the top of his skull, nearly chopping off Grim's arm in the process. A second blow struck Becket's head again, and a third blow caused him to fall to his elbows and knees, with his brain exposed. Grim relates that



### Fatal outburst

Dating from the 1170s, this is the earliest known depiction of Thomas Becket's murder, including (below) the moment one of the archbishop's assailants directs a sword blow at his head

from this prostrate position, Becket prayed in a low voice: "For the name of Jesus Christ and the well-being of the church, I am prepared to embrace death." The fourth blow, dealt by Le Bret, severed his skullcap and caused the tip of this knight's sword to shatter.

Grim describes this horror using memorable, allegorical language: "The crown... was separated from the head, so that the blood white from the brain, and the brain equally red from the blood, brightened the floor with the colours of the lily and the rose, the virgin and mother, and the life and death of the confessor and martyr."

The final strike came not from a knight but the clerk, Hugh, who "put his foot on the neck of the holy priest and precious martyr,

and – horrible to say – scattered the brains with blood over the pavement". Pleased with his work, Hugh exclaimed: "Let's be off, knights. This man will not get up again!", and they left the cathedral. Not even in *Game of Thrones* could such violence and malice co-mingle in so sacred a context.

### Profane crime scene

The king's men had turned Canterbury Cathedral, founded by Saint Augustine in the sixth century, into a profane crime scene – and the monks and people of Canterbury stood together in absolute shock. The townsfolk used their clothes as rags to mop up the blood; others dipped their hands in it, collected it in their own vessels for safekeep-

ing, and rubbed it around their eyes.

These actions might strike the modern-day person as odd but, in the Middle Ages, this ritualistic behaviour signified something extremely important: the archbishop of Canterbury had just transformed into a martyr, and his blood could serve as a powerful and miracle-working relic.

According to William FitzStephen, a friend of Becket's, a miracle took place that very night when a certain man in Canterbury placed a cloth soaked in Becket's blood in water, and then gave this to his ailing wife. She drank the mixture and was cured. This would be the first of many miracles related to the cult of Becket. It initiated a special, site-specific ritual practice of drinking 'The

water of Saint Thomas', a holy combination of flecks of Becket's blood mixed with water, prepared by Canterbury monks, and offered – often in ampullae – to Canterbury pilgrims as a curative drink.

Meanwhile, the terrified monks hurried to bury Becket before the knights could subject his body to further desecration. They turned him over and tried to fit his severed cranium back on his head. One eyewitness named Benedict of Peterborough remarked that the archbishop's face looked peaceful and perfect – except for a single line of blood that stretched diagonally across his left cheek to his right temple. In a number of miracles, in which Becket would visit people in their dreams, the saint appeared with this same line across his face; it became an uncanny signature of his saintly identity.

When Henry II heard the news of the assassination, he was afraid. Contemporary historians relate that the king had no intention of this murder, nor any idea that it would take place. However, Henry admitted to strongly disliking the archbishop, so he called himself a sinner and asked for forgiveness.

On 21 May 1172, Henry admitted – swearing upon a book of the Gospels – that he was to blame for inadvertently causing the death of Becket. Part of his penance would include donations in Becket's name, and the restoration of property and positions to his friends and family. On 12 July 1174, Henry agreed to an act of almost unparalleled royal humiliation to express his shame. He removed his crown and walked barefoot in humble clothes from St Dunstan's Church through the West Gate and through the streets of the city of Canterbury, leading his own penitential parade to the cathedral. He then spent that night fasting by the tomb of Saint Thomas Becket, trembling and sobbing.

### **Gothic masterpiece**

On 5 September 1174 – less than four years after Becket's death – tragedy once more struck Canterbury Cathedral, when a fire ripped through its east end. Far from diminishing the building's status, however, this event would elevate it to the status of one of Europe's most sacred sites – and help explain why the cult of Becket proved so alluring to so many people for so many years.

Over the 14 years following the fire – first under the stewardship of the French architect William of Sens, and then (after William fell 50 feet from scaffolding), directed by a monk named William the Englishman – Canterbury was transformed into a Gothic masterpiece. The walls were vaulted with pointed arches and flooded with colourful glass; the experience of the space was enhanced by maximising height and light; and the build-



**Miracle-worker** The apparition of Thomas Becket cures an ailing man in a stained glass window in Canterbury Cathedral. News of the slain archbishop's acts of healing started circulating within days of his death

## **The windows in Becket's shrine were like billboards advertising his many miracles**

ing's most sacred site, the Trinity Chapel, was overhauled because, as Gervase of Canterbury observed, "a chapel of Saint Thomas was to be built there". William the Englishman also directed the construction of the Corona chapel to house the top of Becket's skull, which he completed in 1184.

With the new Gothic fabric in place, the stone walls would be filled with the vivid stories of Becket's miracles, illustrated in the c1180–1220s stained glass surrounding the Trinity Chapel. If the ambulatory around the shrine was a highway for the traffic of pilgrims, then the windows were the billboards, advertising Becket's miracle-working power.

This traffic came to a crashing halt in 1538, when Henry VIII ordered – as part of the dissolution of the monasteries – the destruction of Becket's relics and shrine. Most

historians agree that Becket's bones were burned and the ashes scattered, though some claim that they were shot out of a cannon, or thrown into the river Stour. Others maintain, with limited evidence, that they could have survived in some secret place (and assume that a skeleton unearthed in 1888 in the crypt might actually be that of the saint).

A glittering ruby once affixed to the shrine – thought to be a gift of King Louis VII of France, which was admired by countless pilgrims – is said to have been converted into a ring by Henry VIII, which some scholars believe he wore on his thumb.

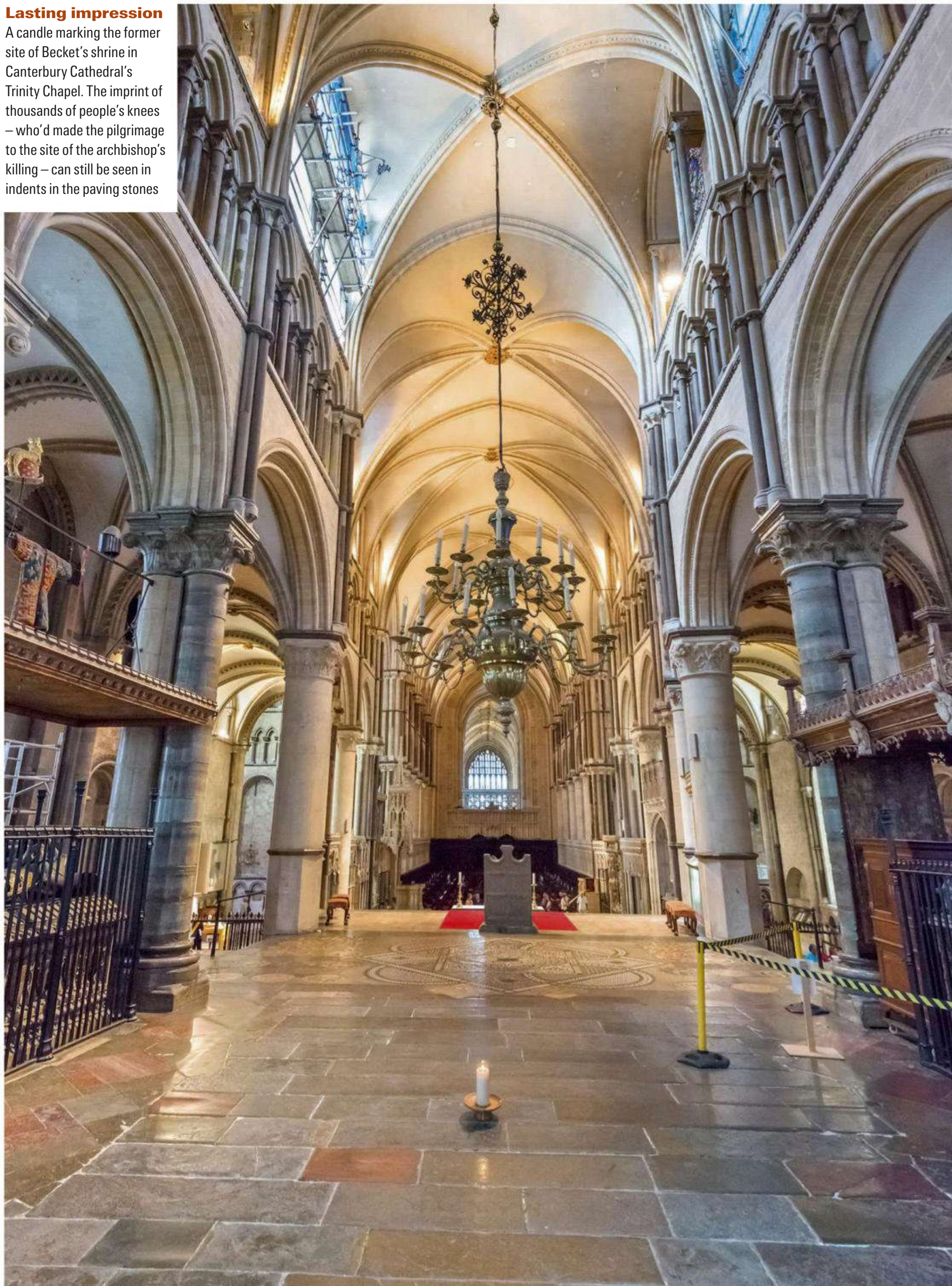
### **Resurrected and retold**

But not even a figure as formidable as that of Henry VIII could totally extinguish interest in Becket. After a protracted silence – and with a little help from playwrights like Alfred, Lord Tennyson and actors such as Laurence Olivier and Richard Burton – the archbishop's story has been resurrected and retold. From the enduring appeal of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to TS Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Becket's martyrdom continues to captivate the public imagination today.

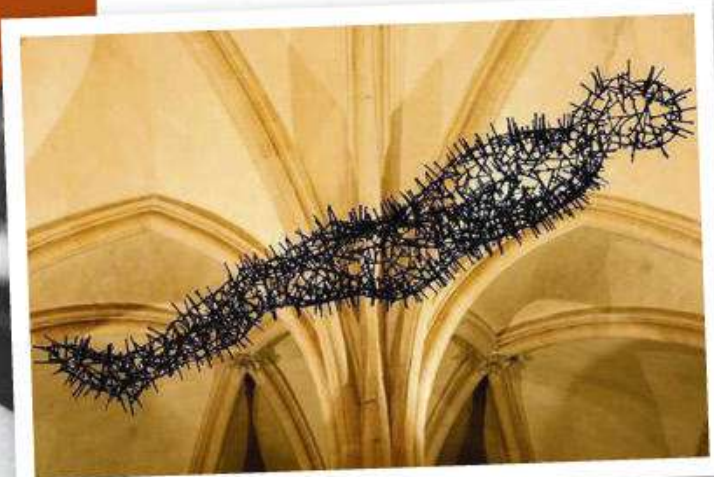
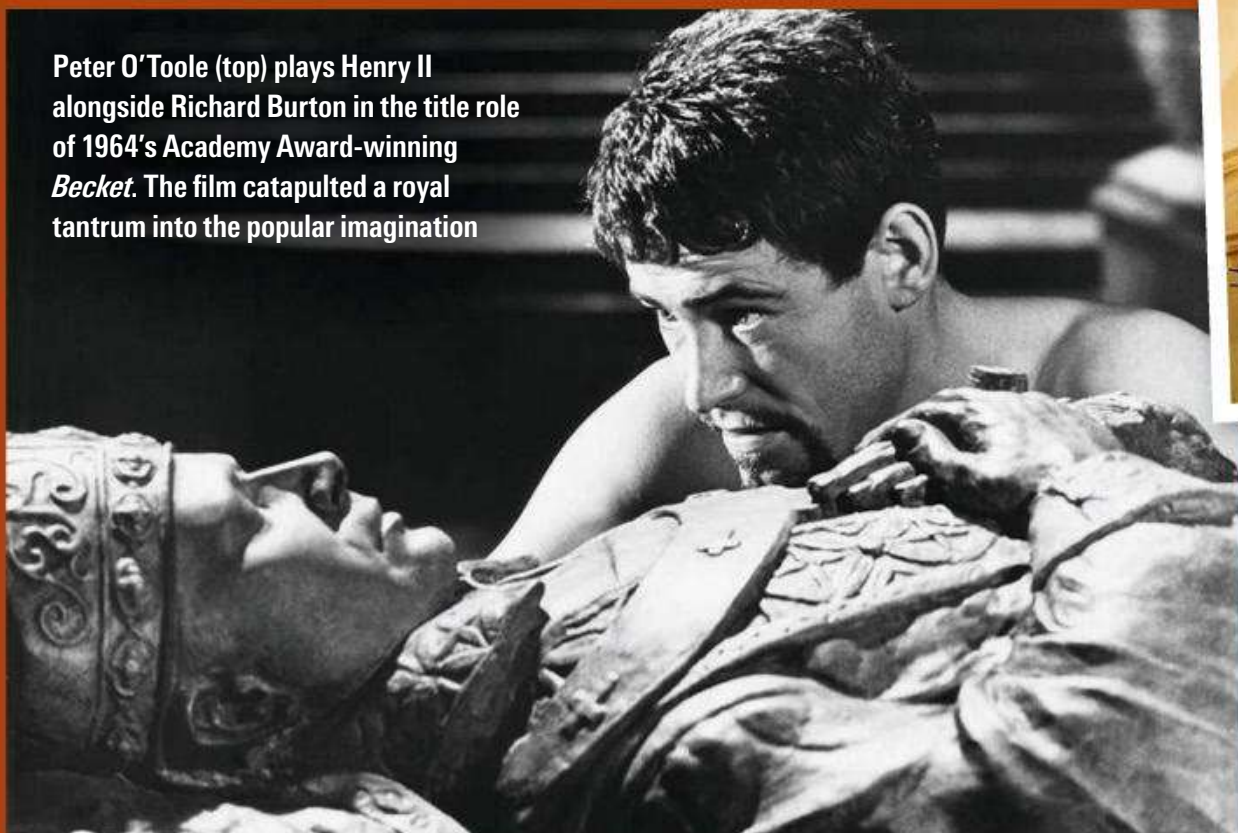
This was evidenced in 2016, when what was purported to be a fragment of Becket's elbow was 'returned' to the cathedral for a brief visit by its guardians in Esztergom, Hungary in a ceremonial procession. In the near future, a fragment of a vestment he once wore, now venerated in the church of Santa

### Lasting impression

A candle marking the former site of Becket's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral's Trinity Chapel. The imprint of thousands of people's knees – who'd made the pilgrimage to the site of the archbishop's killing – can still be seen in indents in the paving stones



Peter O'Toole (top) plays Henry II alongside Richard Burton in the title role of 1964's Academy Award-winning *Becket*. The film catapulted a royal tantrum into the popular imagination



A sculpture comprising 210 nails salvaged from Canterbury Cathedral's roof hovers above the former site of Becket's body

## MEDDLING WITH THE TRUTH

Is Henry II's notorious lament, "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?", fact or fabrication?

On 8 June 2017, Thomas Becket made a surprise appearance in the investigation into possible Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. Former FBI director James Comey had been summoned to appear before a hearing of a Senate Intelligence Committee to provide "texture and context" about his interactions with President Trump. About an hour and 40 minutes into proceedings, Senator Angus King of Maine asked Comey about Trump's "hope" that Comey would stop the investigation of General Michael Flynn, the disgraced former national security adviser – at which point Comey made a pointed reference to Becket's martyrdom.

**King:** "When a president of the United States in the Oval office says something like 'I hope' or 'I suggest' or 'Would you?', do you take that as a directive?"

**Comey:** "Yes. Yes. It rings in my ears as kind of 'Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?'"

**King:** "I was just going to quote that! In 1170 December 29 Henry II said: 'Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest?' and the next day he was killed, Thomas à Becket, that is exactly the same situation."

That the term "meddlesome priest" was used in such a context proves just how intertwined those two words have become with Henry II's fateful outburst about Becket – an outburst, so the story goes, that four knights misinterpreted as

a directive to kill the archbishop. But, in reality, there's no way of knowing precisely what Henry said. Edward Grim, the most influential of Becket's hagiographers, reports a different exclamation in his account of c1171–72. Grim, who was an eyewitness to the murder, wrote that Henry said: "What miserable drones and traitors have I nurtured and promoted in my household who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric!"

So there's no mention of "meddlesome priest" here. In fact, it was another 800 years before the term first entered the popular imagination, when it was uttered by Peter O'Toole, while playing King Henry II in the 1964 film *Becket*. Opposite O'Toole was Richard Burton, cast in the title role, which he performed with an unmovable moral resilience.

The film was based on the successful Tony-winning play of the same name, written by the French dramatist Jean Anouilh. It was first performed in Paris in 1959 and then New York City in 1960, starring Lawrence Olivier and Anthony Quinn. But there's no mention of the "meddlesome priest" in Anouilh's script. The line should instead be credited to Edward Anhalt, who adapted the play for the silver screen. Although the film received 12 Academy Award nominations, only Anhalt – the man who apparently fabricated one of the most notorious refrains of the Middle Ages – won the Oscar.

Maria Maggiore in Rome, will return to Canterbury, on loan for an exhibition.

Even though Becket's body has been absent from Canterbury Cathedral for nearly five centuries, his presence can still be seen and felt today. Eagle-eyed visitors can spot the former outline of the Trinity Chapel shrine and in the visible indent of the paving stones, left behind by the imprint of countless curved knees pressed – again and again – into the marble. Suspended from the central vault of the crypt, an evocative sculpture by Antony Gormley (pictured above), installed in 2011, hovers above the former location of Becket's body.

But perhaps the most meaningful, physical legacy of Becket at Canterbury is the Gothic cathedral itself, erected to enable the archbishop to become a major martyr, to explicate his power in art and architecture and facilitate the experience of devotion for pilgrims. If Becket's body – and severed 'crown' – once served as the battery for an encounter with the holy, then the Gothic design of the cathedral is a machine charged with meaning.

Just look closely whenever you next visit Canterbury and you'll see some trace of the saint whose blood and brains once covered the floor, and whose spirit and story gave solace to so many people. **H**

**Emily Guerry** is senior lecturer in medieval history at the University of Kent. She is a co-organiser of the conference *Thomas Becket: Life, Death and Legacy*, due to be held at Canterbury Cathedral in April

### VISIT AND ONLINE

A major exhibition, **Thomas Becket: Murder and the Making of a Saint**, is scheduled to run at the British Museum from 22 April to 22 August [britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/thomas-becket](http://britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/thomas-becket) You can view reconstructions of Becket's shrines on the web resource **The Becket Story** [thebecketstory.org.uk](http://thebecketstory.org.uk)

» Turn the page to read our feature on murders in medieval churches



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Men of No 83 Squadron are all smiles as they pass a Handley Page Hampden bomber at RAF Scampton, Lincolnshire, October 1940

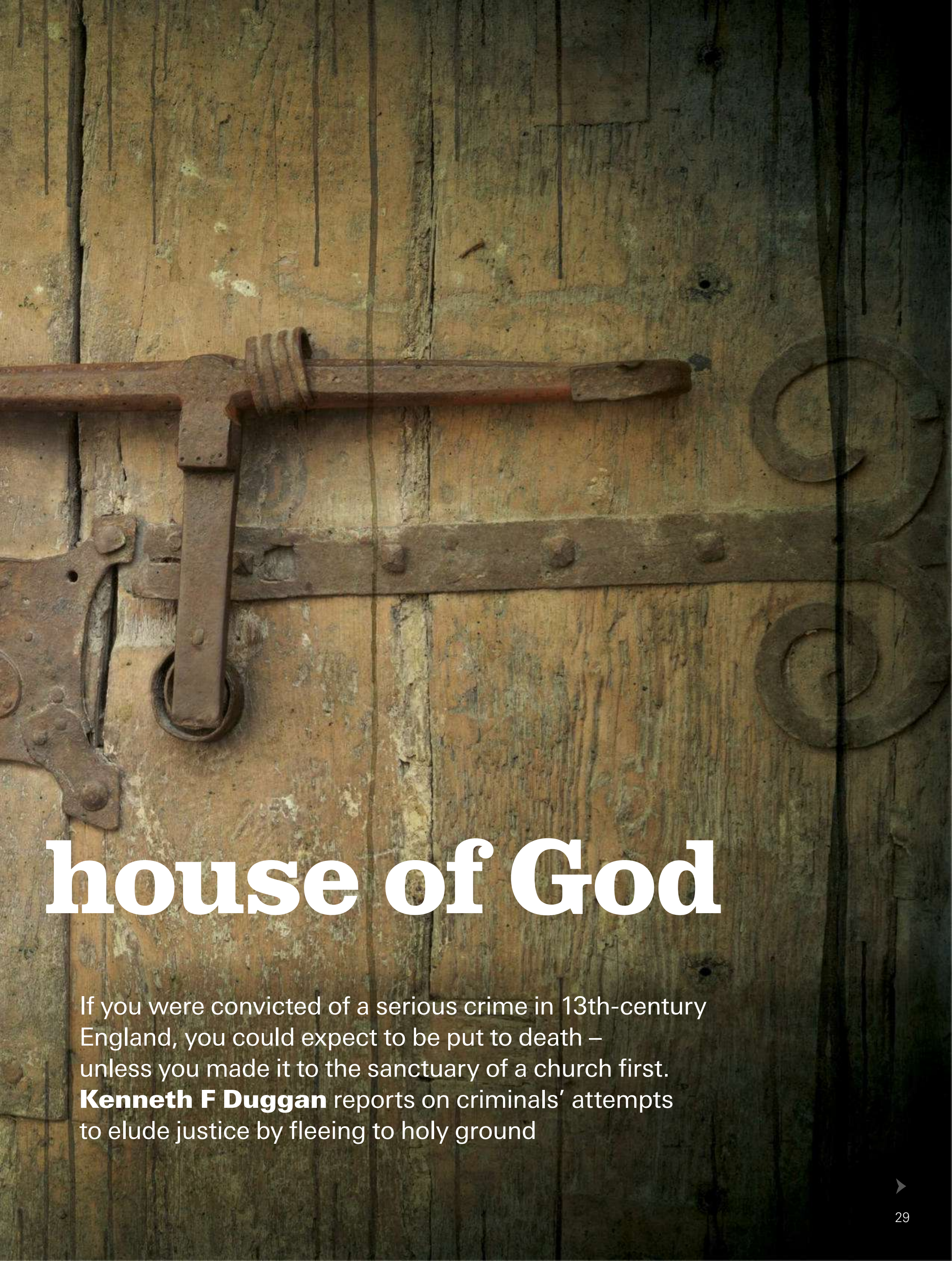


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# Killers in the



# house of God

If you were convicted of a serious crime in 13th-century England, you could expect to be put to death – unless you made it to the sanctuary of a church first. **Kenneth F Duggan** reports on criminals' attempts to elude justice by fleeing to holy ground

**L**aurence Duket raced to the church of St Mary-le-Bow in London on 26 July 1284. Although only a handful of people initially knew why he sought sanctuary there that evening, everyone in London would come to know of Duket's story when, five days later, his lifeless body was discovered hanging from a beam inside that very church.

Londoners heard how Duket had attacked Ralph Crepyn in the parish of Westcheap, giving him what the court records say was a "nearly deadly wound". At the time, Duket thought he had killed Crepyn, an alderman and London's first recorded town clerk. Fearing he would be hanged for committing homicide, Duket immediately headed to the sanctuary of St Mary-le-Bow.

Running to a church for protection after committing a crime was not uncommon. People knew to do it. Sanctuary was recognised as a right granted specifically to criminals as an extension of Christ's mercy. According to contemporary English law, no one could be forcibly removed from the sanctuary of a church – not even a criminal. And in many places a church's sanctuary extended beyond the walls of the building and encompassed the entire churchyard.

By gaining sanctuary in St Mary-le-Bow, Duket was protected from those bent on capturing and punishing him. So it was shocking to many that Duket was found dead in the church on the morning of 31 July.

Initially Duket's death was believed to be a suicide. Surely no one would dare to kill someone in a church. But before the coroner had an opportunity to examine Duket's body and confirm the cause of death, sheriff Jordan Goodcheap had it cut down and buried in a ditch beyond the city walls. The story would have ended there had it not been for a boy who had witnessed what happened on the night of 30 July: Crepyn's friends had snuck into the church, beat and stabbed Duket to death, cleaned the wounds, and then hanged him in an attempt to make it appear as if Duket had taken his own life.

### A poisoned chalice

Murders rarely occurred in medieval churches, but when they did, news of them travelled far and wide. William FitzHerbert, archbishop of York, died during mass in 1154 after he drank from a poisoned chalice. And the bishop of Hereford's agent, Bernard, prior of Champagne, was murdered during mass in the episcopal chapel in 1252. But arguably the most famous example of a murder in a church is Thomas Becket's assassination in Canterbury Cathedral on 29 December 1170 – made



### Right to asylum

In this 19th-century lithograph, a medieval criminal claims sanctuary by placing his arm through the ring on a church door

## Churches helped keep the peace by providing fugitives with a safe space while tempers cooled

all the more controversial by the fact that the killers apparently believed that they were acting on King Henry II's orders.

The death of Becket was an exceptional case. Instead of being involved in murders within churches, medieval rulers were responsible for ensuring the safety of people in sanctuary, as well as the trial and punishment of those who killed in churches.

Upon hearing about Duket's killers, the crown sent a special commission of justices to deal with "the Satellites of Satan" who had committed the heinous deed. For their felonious and sacrilegious act, seven men were publicly drawn and hanged. An eighth person, Alice of Gloucester (Crepyn's mistress, who reportedly recruited the other murderers), was burned alive. Finally, Ralph Crepyn and the sheriff were imprisoned and forced to pay heavy financial penalties for their role in the concealment of the crime.

In early medieval England, offences such as homicide were dealt with through a system of feud and compensation. Family and friends of both offenders and victims settled matters largely on their own, without royal intervention. In this environment, churches

played a fundamental role in the maintenance of law and order. They reduced instances of retaliation, helping prevent feuds from erupting into violent, large-scale conflict by providing protected spaces in which fugitives could remain unmolested while tempers cooled. They also afforded wrongdoers' families and friends time to negotiate peaceful (usually financial) settlements with victims and their family.

But things changed. The royal government increasingly took control over the punishment of crime away from local communities. By the 13th century, people in England were no longer permitted to settle criminal matters on their own through a system of feud and compensation. All homicides and thefts of goods valued at 12 pence or more had to be brought to the attention of royal justices so that they could try and punish the criminals.

### Returned to church

Yet the church remained a hugely powerful force in medieval England and, as such, individual churches retained the prerogative to act as sanctuaries for suspected criminals. In fact, the rules and practices of sanctuary became even more entrenched in English criminal law once the punishment for crime transitioned from compensation to execution. The crown and its royal justices endeavoured to ensure that anyone who entered a consecrated church would not be removed from it unwillingly. If a person *was* forcibly removed from sanctuary, the justices would return that person to the church.

In 1277, Richard Hutte was captured in Wiltshire with stolen goods on him. But he escaped from custody and fled to the church of St Peter in Old Salisbury. While in sanctuary, Hutte's pursuers pulled him from the church by force with the intention of making him stand trial. To their dismay, once the royal justices discovered what had happened they ordered "that he be restored to that church".

Considering that the punishment for committing a crime in 13th-century England was often death by hanging, it's understandable that suspected criminals sought sanctuary. Yet they could not remain in sanctuary indefinitely. They had 40 days to make one of two decisions: they could hand themselves over to the coroner who would have them gaoled (or sometimes bailed) until trial, or they could abjure the realm.

Abjuration was the process by which individuals in sanctuary confessed to a crime before a coroner and people from the neighbouring villages. Then, after their confession, they obtained licence to depart permanently from the kingdom under the crown's



### Seat of power

A judge pronounces justice in a c13th-century illumination. Draconian punishments awaited those who exacted retribution on fugitives within a church's walls



### Fear factor

A convict is led to the gallows in a 15th-century woodcut. With hanging the punishment for many crimes, suspects hardly lacked motivation to seek sanctuary in the church



### Last chance saloon

St John the Baptist church in Fladbury, where murderer Robert Gorwy claimed sanctuary in c1275. After being given permission to abjure the realm, Gorwy was captured and beheaded

protection. As long as abjurors did not stray from the path leading to the port chosen for their departure, or remain in any place longer than one night, then they would not be captured and tried for their crime.

However, if they wandered around or remained in one place too long they could be killed with impunity. In c1275, Robert Gorwy claimed sanctuary in Fladbury church in Worcestershire. He summoned the coroner and confessed that he had killed David, son of Robert the Miller, by striking him in the head with a staff. After his confession, Robert was permitted to abjure the realm. But Robert had other plans. He failed to stick to the route that had been assigned to him. He was likely attempting to flee somewhere in England where he could set up a new life rather than leave the kingdom. Whatever the reason, it was a bad decision. He was captured and beheaded.

### Straying into danger

Sometimes abjurors were killed even when they followed the rules. Aylmer l'Escot was abjuring the realm after he had killed a man with an axe and claimed sanctuary in Westmorland. In c1256, while heading to the port he was forced off the road and beheaded.

## In 1196, Hubert Walter smoked William Fitz Osbert out of sanctuary by starting a fire near the church

Similarly, two burglars from Yorkshire named Alan, son of Roger and John Carpenter were seized on the king's highway and beheaded while they were abjuring in c1257.

Technically, those who killed abjurors could be charged with murder – but when they could claim that the abjurors had strayed from the path to the port, this was often difficult to prove. Consequently, those who killed abjurors often received lenient penalties – if they were punished at all. Imprisonment until a fine was paid, or the confiscation of their chattels rather than execution,

was often the highest price they could expect to pay.

Most abjurors didn't meet the same grisly fate as Aylmer l'Escot. They did, however, lose everything they owned. The crown confiscated the goods and lands of all people who fled from royal justice (whether they were guilty or not). This included the goods of any person who claimed sanctuary. Additionally, abjurors could never return to the kingdom. If they did, they risked summary execution. This was the price they had to pay to avoid trial and death by hanging.

What the authorities did when confronted with someone who refused to quit sanctuary is less clear. One technique, employed by Hubert Walter against William Fitz Osbert in 1196, involved smoking out the fugitive by starting a large fire near the church. (Some records state that the church itself was actually set on fire.)

But this was a unique situation. Hubert Walter was both the archbishop of Canterbury and the justiciar. The dispute had begun when Hubert had ordered a group of men to arrest William, the leader of a popular uprising of Londoners against the oppressions of taxation. On their arrival, a fight had broken out and William had killed one of the

men, after which he had fled to the church of St Mary-le-Bow in London (the same church in which Laurence Duket would be killed decades later).

William's freedom was short-lived. When Hubert's fire forced him from the church, William was stabbed by the son of the man he had killed. He survived – but not for long. After being captured, the would-be revolutionary was tried, convicted, dragged behind a horse to the gallows, and hanged.

Technically, Hubert Walter did not break the rules of sanctuary with his underhanded tactic – and the sources suggest that King Richard I was pleased with Hubert's handling of the disturbance in London. Nevertheless, few would dare to repeat Hubert's actions. Surprisingly, the records reveal that few people stayed beyond the 40-day limit, and there's little evidence to indicate that those who did were removed from sanctuary against their will.

### Hopscotching bandits

Once a person claimed sanctuary, the neighbouring villages were notified so they could guard the church to prevent their escape (the crown did not want bandits and outlaws using sanctuaries to hopscotch around England in safety). In fact, whenever someone in sanctuary escaped, these villages were forced to pay a hefty financial penalty.

Escapes happened, but they were uncommon: more than 90 per cent of sanctuary seekers went through the process of abjuration. This demonstrates the power of sanctuary and the respect that people in medieval England had for it. Yet it also shows that medieval churches could be a nuisance to royal justice. Churches, in effect, prevented the crown from trying and punishing its subjects.

While complaints about criminals' use of sanctuary were few and far between, the fact that there *were* murders in churches suggests that sanctuary was a source of resentment for some people. This was probably the case with Laurence Duket's murder. He had so angered Ralph Crepin and his cronies in London that they might have thought abjuration too lenient. So they broke the rules of sanctuary and murdered him.

Ironically, the eight people who were executed for murdering Duket could have saved their own lives had they remained in the sanctuary of St Mary-le-Bow church after committing their heinous crime. **H**

**Kenneth F Duggan** is an assistant professor of history at Western University and a research fellow at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies

## RUNNING FROM THE LAW

Three medieval criminals who sought sanctuary in the church

### 1. Getting away with murder

In c1249, a Wiltshire woman called Susan Pygburd told authorities that she had discovered her husband Roger's dead body lying in his bed in the village of Eblesburn. He had been murdered. Susan soon came under suspicion and was put in custody. However, she had no intention of going to trial. She escaped and fled to a nearby church, where she confessed that

she had killed Roger and was then permitted to abjure the realm.

Why Susan killed Roger is unknown. The only other detail we know about the case is that a man named Walter Scut was also accused of homicide. He fled and was later outlawed. Had Susan stood trial and been convicted, she would have been executed by burning.

### 2. Many unhappy returns

John Franklin was an outlaw who, in c1287, had killed William Lench in Arlingham, Gloucestershire. Being an outlaw meant that anyone could kill him with impunity. But instead of living the remainder of his life in hiding, Franklin returned to Gloucestershire. People there recognised him and pursued him. Luckily for John, he was able to reach Cirencester

church, where he confessed his crime and was permitted to abjure the realm.

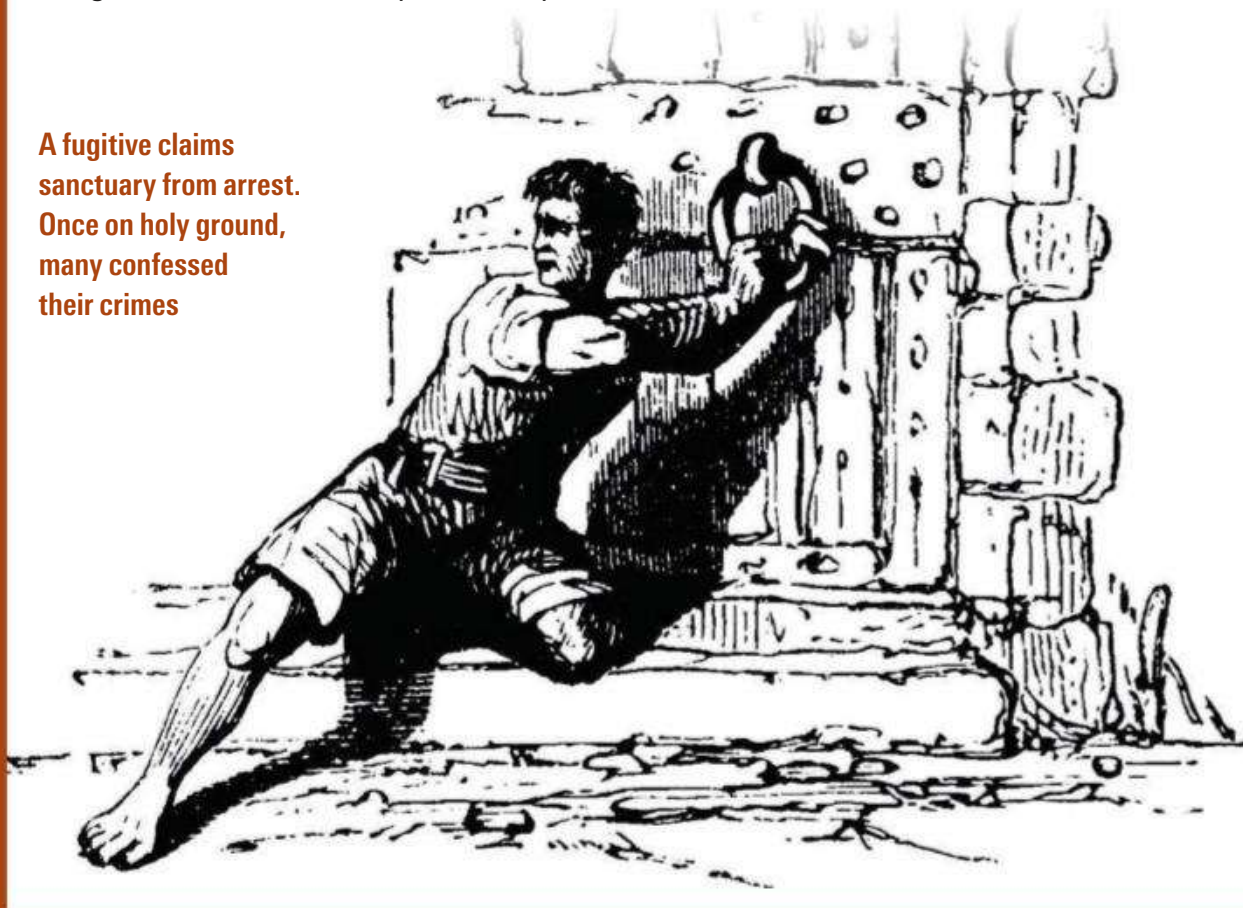
It seemed that Franklin would elude justice because he had reached sanctuary before he could be captured. But instead of abjuring the kingdom, the outlaw returned to the county once again, at which point villagers from Arlingham chased him down and beheaded him.

### 3. A lucky route to the gallows

Reginald Dunch was apprehended in Suffolk in c1286 on suspicion of having committed many thefts. He was brought to gaol and, later, tried before royal justices in Ipswich. The verdict: guilty. After the case was heard, villagers from Barking were ordered to take Dunch to the gallows. But on the way there they

"led him through the middle of the churchyard of All Saints in Ipswich, and he remained there once he entered the churchyard and refused to leave until he abjured the realm". Did the villagers walk Reginald to the gallows through a churchyard by accident or design? No one knows.

**A fugitive claims sanctuary from arrest. Once on holy ground, many confessed their crimes**



# August Agboola Browne

## Freedom-fighting jazzman

Nigerian-born Browne was famous in interwar Poland for his musical talents, but he earned renown of a different kind when he became the only black insurgent in the Warsaw Uprising. **CLARE MULLEY** profiles the rebel who marched to the beat of his own drum

**D**escribed as “a strappingly handsome, exceptionally elegant fellow”, August Agboola Browne was over 6 foot tall, a talented jazz musician and a polyglot when he stepped off the ship onto Britain’s shores in 1958. Although he had been born in Lagos, and his arrival coincided with that of the Windrush generation, Browne was not travelling from Nigeria or the Caribbean. For most of his life, he had lived in Poland, where he had often made headlines: for his music, his marriage, and for fighting for his adopted country during the Second World War. [And Browne is in the news again, as documents have recently come to light that seem to tell a different story of his wartime exploits. See page 36.] Despite being among the few to receive postwar recognition as a hero of the Polish resistance, however, he was now emigrating once more, and this time he chose to live so quietly that his incredible story was almost forgotten.

Browne had been 27 when he left Nigeria on a merchant ship bound for Britain in 1922. Legend has it that he travelled Europe with a theatre troupe, until settling in Poland. Here the charismatic émigré secured work as a jazz percussionist at the most fashionable clubs in Poland’s cosmopolitan cities. Warsaw, the ‘Paris of the North’, had a vibrant music scene, where homegrown talent mixed with a small African community. Some locals resented the “black goods” getting such “thunderous applause”, as the

Warsaw daily *Rzeczpospolita* put it, but Browne quickly gained celebrity status as part of a well-known quartet. Photographer Andrzej Zborski regularly saw him cutting a striking figure among the predominantly white citizens of the city, dressed in his trademark pale suits, vibrant ties and “always with a suitable hat”.

In 1927 Browne tied the knot with a white Polish woman called Zofia Pykówna. The Warsaw papers delighted in the “white-chocolate” romance between this “authentic Negro” and “authentic Polish woman”, which saw “exotic wedding crowds [gather] in the

church”. Although it was Browne’s ethnicity, rather than his name as a musician, that carried the story, mixed marriages such as this would not be legal in all American states for another 40 years. The following year brought more to celebrate. Zofia gave birth to the first of the couple’s two sons, and Browne recorded an album, making history as the first Nigerian jazzman to do so.

The Warsaw jazz scene flourished during the mid-1930s, as increasing numbers of Jewish performers arrived from Germany. Some openly mocked the Nazi regime with the scornful greeting: “Swing heil!” As the Nazi threat grew, many fled again, along with the small African community. But Browne stayed. He spoke five languages and had friends across the world, but Poland was his home.

### Greatest act of resistance

Nazi Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, marking the start of the Second World War. By now Browne’s marriage had failed. He helped his wife and children to leave Poland but chose to stay himself. Two weeks later, Soviet forces also entered Poland under the secret terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Poland resisted heroically, but the country’s armed forces were unable to defend two fronts at once. Eventually the Polish government and some of the military fled overseas to regroup, and Poland was divided between the aggressors.

Browne had served in the defence of Warsaw under the codename ‘Ali’. He spent the next five years teaching languages, trading in electrical equipment and distributing medicines in the Nazi-occupied capital. Although both his celebrity status and his distinctly “non-Aryan” appearance greatly increased the risk of identification and arrest, he helped to distribute an illegal resistance newssheet and to shelter those escaping from the city’s Jewish ghetto; both activities were punishable by death.

However, Browne’s greatest action of resistance took place in the summer and autumn of 1944. Three years earlier, Hitler’s unexpected invasion of Soviet territory had forced Stalin to join the Allies. By the summer of 1944, British, American and Soviet forces were all pushing towards Berlin. The tide of the war was turning, and on 1 August around 50,000 men and women of the Polish resistance launched a coordinated attack on the troops occupying their capital. The aim of the Warsaw Uprising was to free the city from the Nazis, enabling it to receive

“ Browne’s unit fought on through Warsaw’s ruins, sleeping in cellars and navigating the city through the sewers ”





Rebels fight in the Home Army to liberate Warsaw from Nazism in 1944. Browne was the only known black insurgent to take part in the uprising



A saxophonist at a student night club in Poland, 1958. In the interwar period, Browne had made headlines in Poland as part of a well-known jazz quartet – and, in 1949, he was allowed to play once more

and was among the just 6 per cent of the surviving population to spend VE Day in the city's ruins.

Immediately after the end of the war, Soviet secret police started rounding up the leaders of the Polish Home Army. Many permanently disappeared. But Browne's ethnicity, which had been an additional danger during the war, now suited the official communist narrative of equality and 'international' appeal. Once installed, the new Soviet-backed regime recognised his war service, and in 1949 he joined the official veterans' association, the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy. It is his membership form, complete with a photograph showing a greying but gently smiling man, that provides most of the information we have on Browne's war service. That same year he was also employed by the Warsaw Department of Culture and Art and was permitted to resume playing jazz.

A number of the photographs of Browne we have today come from his 1953 appearance in the propaganda film *Soldier of Victory*, a Soviet-backed biopic of the Polish-born communist general Karol 'Walter' Świerczewski. Browne could hardly have missed the irony. Although born in Warsaw, Świerczewski had been evacuated to Moscow in 1915, where he joined the Bolshevik Party. An alcoholic liability, he had nevertheless participated in the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939. Whatever the extenuating

circumstances, through his role in the film Browne found himself helping to promote a communist rewrite of history, when he had consistently fought for Polish freedom in the face of Soviet aggression and contempt.

After Stalin's death, restrictions began to ease in Poland and Browne secured permission to emigrate with his second wife, Olga Miechowicz, with the pair arriving in Britain in 1958. It was another two years before the country of his birth, Nigeria, gained independence from Britain,

and 30 more before the first postwar democratic elections saw the end of communism in Poland. Browne remained in Britain until his death in 1976, working as a session musician and giving piano lessons to support his new family. But he never spoke publicly about his remarkable life and told little of his exploits even to his daughter. He had had enough of politics, it seems. His Hampstead gravestone records him simply as "a beloved husband and father". **H**

**Clare Mulley** is the award-winning author of *The Spy Who Loved*, *The Women Who Flew for Hitler*, and *The Woman Who Saved the Children*. Her website is [claremulley.com](http://claremulley.com)

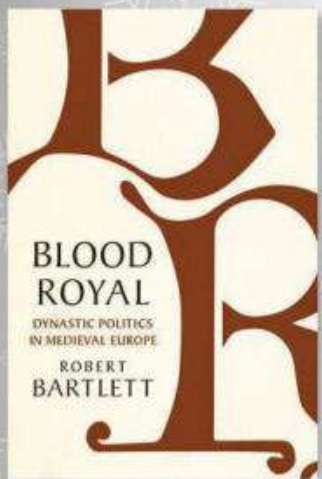
#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

Since writing this article, a set of documents from the 1960s has been unearthed by an academic at the City University of New York. Written when Browne was living in London, these seem to show that he claimed compensation from the German government for the detrimental impact on his health sustained when he was held in various concentration camps inside Nazi-occupied Poland between May 1940 and April 1945. Although the International Tracing Service of the International Red Cross found no record of Browne at the camps, the Foreign Office concluded in his favour.

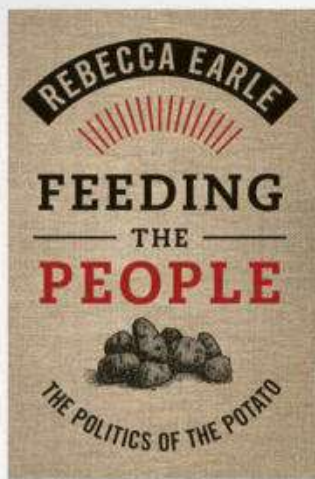
Browne's two known accounts of his wartime experiences, his 1949 application to join the Polish veterans' association and his newly discovered 1965 declaration detailing his imprisonment by the Nazis, both hand-signed, are incompatible. That he seemingly did not mention being a prisoner until 1965, that the Red Cross could not place him in any of the camps he mentioned, and that witnesses claimed to have seen him during the uprising, suggests he did indeed serve, but later tailored his story for his audience and circumstances. Either way, Browne seems to have become an unreliable witness.

**His ethnicity, which had been an additional danger during the war, now suited the official communist narrative**

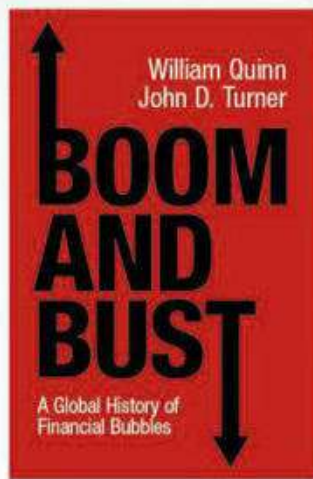
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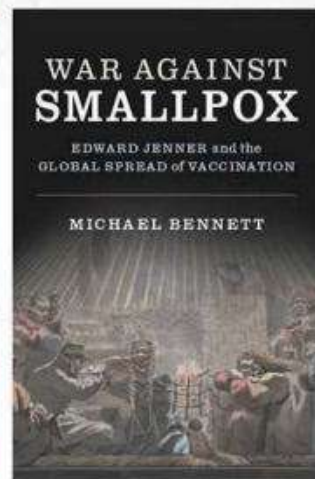
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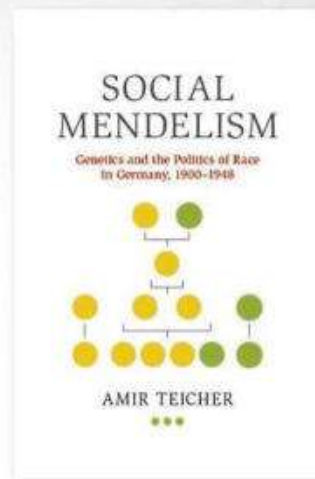
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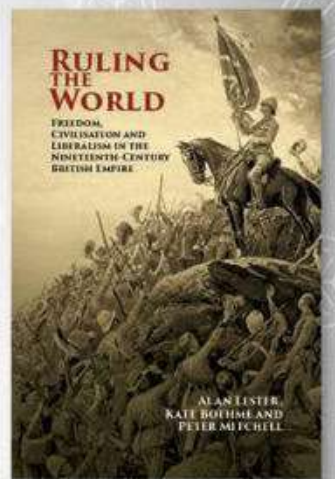
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Illustration by Lauren Rolwing

# *Miracle* CURES

As the race to develop a Covid-19 vaccine reaches a climax, **Gareth Williams** explores four previous attempts to rid the world of lethal diseases, from Edward Jenner's "delightful" war on smallpox to the rancorous battle to consign polio to the past





**V**accines are back in the news, as a bridge that will hopefully lead us safely over the troubled waters of the Covid-19 pandemic. More than a hundred Covid-19 vaccines are in development worldwide, and three may be ready for use in millions of people early in 2021. This is astonishing progress, given that Covid-19 was unknown a year ago, but it doesn't guarantee success. History has shown that promising vaccines can fail to perform in real life; as with HIV, we may still be waiting for a safe and effective Covid-19 vaccine a decade from now.

Unsurprisingly, vaccines only work if people take them. At present, up to one-third of Britons may choose not to be vaccinated against Covid-19 – possibly enough to prevent us from achieving 'herd' immunity. Meanwhile, the race continues for a prize worth billions of dollars and incalculable propaganda value. It's already a dirty fight, with Russian media claiming that the University of Oxford's vaccine (which uses a harmless chimpanzee virus as a delivery capsule) will turn those vaccinated into monkeys.

### Getting to the point

The history of vaccination began formally in 1798, when Edward Jenner showed that inoculating healthy subjects with cowpox, a mild disease of cattle, protected them against smallpox. This was momentous news, as smallpox was one of humanity's greatest scourges, killing one person in 12 worldwide and all but wiping out the Incas and Aztecs. Others had already experimented with 'cowpoxing', but Jenner was the first to report the process and introduce it into medical practice.

The word 'vaccination', from Jenner's invented Latin name for cowpox, was coined in 1800 by Plymouth surgeon Richard Dunning. Eighty years later, in homage to Jenner, Louis Pasteur proposed that the word should cover all inoculations that protect against infections. Pasteur is best known for inventing the first vaccine against rabies, but he also developed vaccines against the bacterial infections cholera and anthrax.

Two other landmark vaccines were those against the dreaded tuberculosis and polio infections. The BCG vaccine against tuberculosis took more than 15 years to

perfect. Its early success was marred in 1929 when 72 children died in Lübeck, Germany after being given BCG accidentally contaminated with live tuberculosis. Almost 30 years later, the first polio vaccination campaign in America was nearly derailed by a similar catastrophe, when batches of Jonas Salk's vaccine were contaminated with live poliovirus that caused fatal outbreaks of paralytic polio.

Why would anyone not want to be vaccinated against dangerous or even lethal infections? Opposition to Jenner's vaccine sprang up almost immediately, with religious objections against this 'bestial' practice which defied the will of God to determine how and when everyone must die. Many doctors also railed against vaccination, blaming it for side-effects including blood-poisoning and syphilis (both genuine, but rare) and unsubstantiated or invented complications such as cancer, madness and – with graphic illustrations in medical journals – the transformation of vaccinated children into cows.

This brings us back to the present day, and the all-out race for a Covid-19 vaccine. Medical science has come a long way since Jenner, who knew nothing about immunity or even that infections were caused by 'germs'. Today, the anti-vaccination movement is alive and well, and already opposed to Covid-19 vaccines even before they become available. Last year, the World Health Organisation included the refusal to be vaccinated among the top 10 threats to global health. It will be interesting to see how well vaccines and anti-vaccinationists weather the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the meantime, spare a thought for the place where it all started. Dr Jenner's House in Berkeley, Gloucestershire is where Jenner did his experiments with cowpox (and much else), wrote his most famous work and laid the foundations of vaccination and immunology. He died there and is buried in the church next door. The house should be a World Heritage Site, but like other small provincial museums with no government funding, may not survive the Covid pandemic. Please visit [jennermuseum.com](http://jennermuseum.com) – and keep your fingers crossed that Dr Jenner's House will still be there when, thanks to vaccination, the world gets back to normal.

➤ Turn the page to read about the race for smallpox, rabies, TB and polio vaccines

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:

A syringe is filled with a Covid-19 vaccine; an 1802 cartoon lampoons the notion that being vaccinated will turn you into a cow; a patient receives the BCG (tuberculosis) vaccine in 1949; polio pioneer Jonas Salk at work in 1950

GETTY IMAGES

# Jenner's eureka moment

When a cow called 'Blossom' transformed a West Country scientist into a global superstar

Edward Jenner (1749–1823) was more than a jobbing doctor in rural Gloucestershire. He was schooled in the science of medicine by John Hunter, the 'father of experimental surgery', and was appointed a Fellow of the Royal Society after clarifying the nesting habits of the cuckoo. In 1796, he did experiments that proved that healthy children inoculated with cowpox couldn't catch smallpox. We know now that both diseases are caused by viruses so similar that the immunity produced by the benign cowpox also protects against smallpox, which killed up to half of its victims.

According to legend, Jenner got the idea from a milkmaid who told him of the belief among farmers that anyone who caught cowpox (which caused characteristic blisters on cows' teats) was forever safe from smallpox, and could even nurse patients dying of the disease. More likely, Jenner noticed that people who had caught cowpox failed to react to 'variola', the deliberate infection of healthy subjects with a tiny dose of smallpox pus scratched into the skin in the hope of protecting them against a future attack of smallpox. Variolation certainly sounds bizarre, but it often worked and had a much lower mortality than natural smallpox.

In May 1796, Jenner removed fluid from a cowpox blister on the hand of a milkmaid

named Sarah Nelmes, who had been infected by her cow, Blossom. He scratched the fluid into the arm of James Phipps, the eight-year-old son of his gardener, who developed a vaccination blister and a mild fever but quickly recovered. Some weeks later, Jenner variolated the boy – and made the "delightful" observation that the tell-tale pustules of artificial smallpox failed to appear. Jenner followed up this eureka moment with a dozen more cowpox inoculations and almost 30 reports of people with previous cowpox who had later been exposed to smallpox but didn't catch it.

Jenner's initial paper was rejected by the Royal Society, so he self-published *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variola Vaccinae, or Cowpox*. The *Inquiry* came out in September 1798; it was an illustrated do-it-yourself guide to vaccination and soon became a bestseller.

Vaccination spread rapidly across Britain

**Jenner's admirers included Napoleon, who declared: "I can refuse this man nothing"**



A case study from Edward Jenner's *Inquiry*, which he self-published in 1798 after being rebuffed by the Royal Society

and into Europe and North America. From 1802–05, the extraordinary Royal Philanthropic Expedition organised by King Charles IV of Spain took Jenner's invention literally around the world, via the Spanish colonies in the Caribbean, South America and the Indian Ocean.

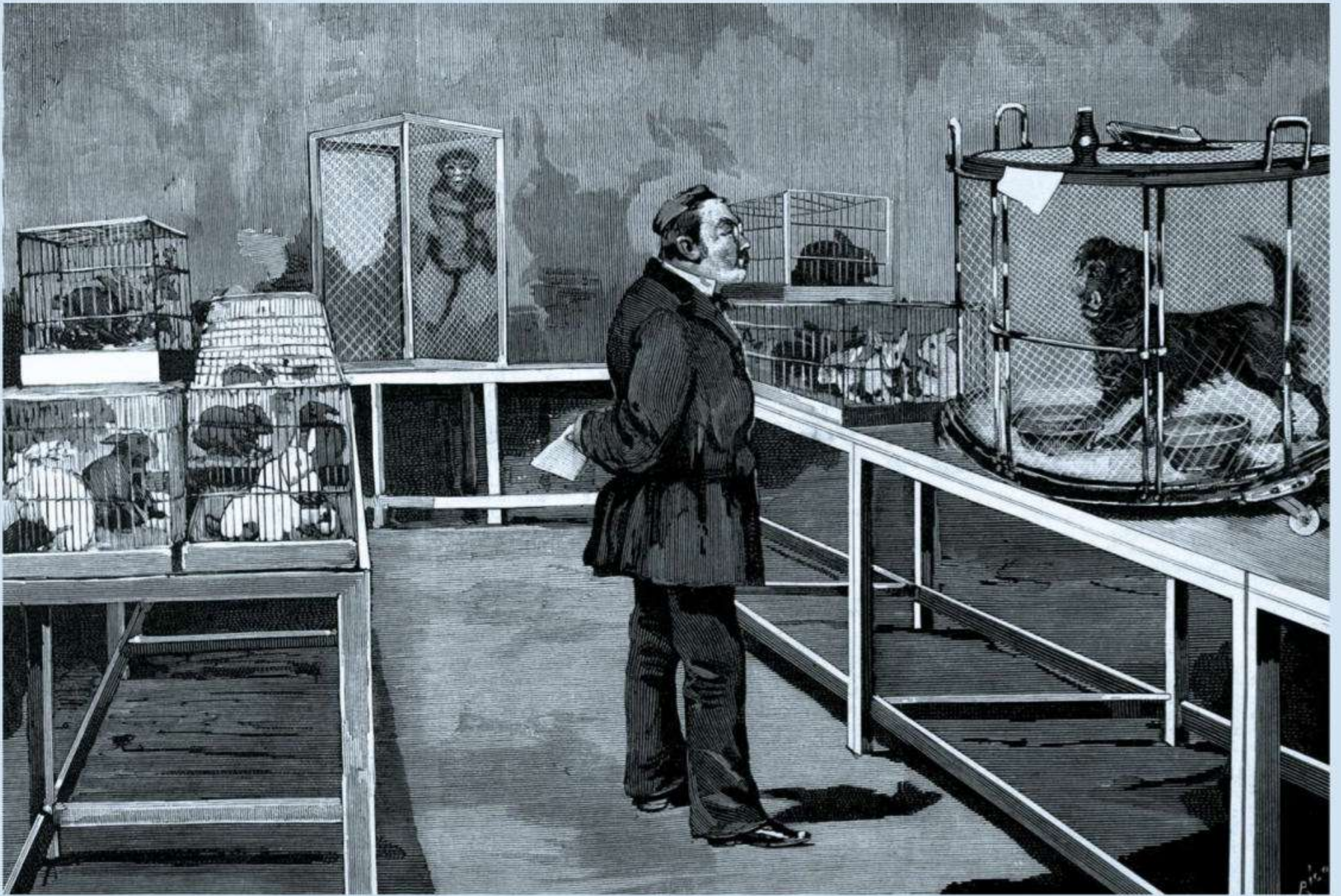
To millions around the world, Jenner was a hero. His admirers included Napoleon (who declared "I can refuse this man nothing" – even though France was at war with England) and the tsar and empress of Russia (who sent him a diamond ring "from Marie"). In 1806, the American president Thomas Jefferson predicted that Jenner would be remembered as the man who rid the world of smallpox.

By the time of Jenner's death in 1823, vaccination had greatly reduced smallpox cases in Europe and America and completely cleared the infection from northern Italy. Jefferson's prophecy ultimately came true in 1980, when the 11-year intensive global vaccination campaign mounted by the World Health Organisation finally achieved 'Target Zero' – the complete extermination of smallpox.

Jenner was handsomely rewarded during his lifetime by honoraria from parliament and, posthumously, by having his statue unveiled by Prince Albert in Trafalgar Square in 1858. By then, both Jenner and vaccination were under attack by the anti-vaccination movement. His enemies had their revenge in 1862, when Jenner's statue was moved from its position of national prominence in Trafalgar Square to Kensington Gardens, where it can be seen today.



**FAR LEFT:** A 19th-century image shows infants being vaccinated with cowpox  
**LEFT:** An inoculation point used to administer cowpox vaccine



Louis Pasteur observes the effects of the rabies virus on various animal subjects in a contemporary engraving

## Dead rabbits and wild dogs

How Louis Pasteur's ingenuity took the bite out of rabies

Louis Pasteur (1822–95) was a biologist who began his career studying an infection of silkworms that threatened to devastate the French silk industry. Later, he developed weakened ('attenuated') strains of cholera and anthrax bacteria; each caused mild symptoms in healthy animals but left them protected against the infection, which was usually fatal.

Pasteur took 'attenuation' to new levels of ingenuity while trying to weaken the infectious agent of rabies, which he managed to extract from the saliva of rabid dogs. We now know that rabies is caused by a virus that enters nerves exposed by a rabid dog's bite, and tracks back

up the nerves to the brain, where it produces a severe, almost universally fatal infection. Depending on the length of the nerve, the back-tracking can take many days, providing doctors with a life-saving window of opportunity to stimulate the patient's immune system and wipe out the virus before it reaches the brain.

Pasteur attenuated rabies by injecting infected saliva extracts into the brain of a live rabbit, then removing the spinal cord after death and drying this for several days. Injected extracts of spinal cord reduced the patient's risk of developing rabies – the first effective treatment for the disease.

Interestingly, the dog that bit Pasteur's celebrated first case – nine-year-old Joseph Meister, brought from Alsace to be saved by Pasteur – may not have had rabies. Nonetheless, Meister's miraculous survival helped to cement Pasteur's reputation, and patients flooded to his lab in the Latin Quarter of Paris from across France, Germany and even Russia.

Being non-medical, Pasteur was never allowed to inject his vaccine into patients. However, like Jenner before him, the Frenchman became an international hero. The network of Pasteur Institutes established across the world has developed many successful vaccines.



Pasteur's early endeavours focused on tackling infections in silkworms, which were vital to the French silk industry

# *When weakness became a strength*

The French scientists who attenuated tuberculosis, and turned it on itself

Tuberculosis (TB) – known as ‘consumption’ because the patient’s flesh seemed to melt away – was an even greater killer than smallpox. The infection destroys the lungs (coughing up blood is a common symptom) and can spread to the kidneys, bones and brain. Before the discovery of the powerful antibiotic streptomycin in 1943, the diagnosis of tuberculosis was often a death sentence, which the wealthy lived out in sanatoria high in the Alps where the clear mountain air was marketed (wrongly) as curative.

The causative bacterium, a rod-shaped bacillus with a tough coat, was discovered in 1882 by Robert Koch – instantly transforming him into a worldwide medical

celebrity. Koch also invented a so-called cure which he named ‘tuberculin’ and tried out on his wife, Hedwig. She survived tuberculin treatment; unfortunately, so did Koch’s bacillus. Early attempts to produce a vaccine also failed.

Success eventually came to Albert Calmette (1863–1933) and Camille Guérin (1872–1961), working at the Pasteur Institute that Calmette set up in Lille. They began with the bovine type of TB, isolated from the milk of an infected cow and weakened by repeated ‘passages’ (transfers into a special culture medium, which they devised after years of trial and error

– the winning recipe involved potatoes,

glycerine and ox bile). The original bovine bacterium killed guinea pigs at tiny doses, but after 39 passages became harmless – yet able to protect animals against human tuberculosis.

The ‘Bacille Calmette-Guérin’ (BCG) vaccine was first tried on a baby in Paris in 1921. By 1928, 50,000 French children had been vaccinated, cutting their risk of dying after coming into contact with a TB patient from one in four to one in 50. BCG was highly effective when administered intradermally (into the skin) using a multi-pronged injection device. Its routine use was discontinued in Britain in 2005, but is still indicated in regions where TB remains prevalent, especially in association with Aids.



**Babies receive the BCG vaccine against tuberculosis in 1949. The life-saving vaccine is still administered to millions of people every year**



In 1953, polio was second only to the atomic bomb as the average American's greatest fear

Jonas Salk (left) and Albert Sabin (below) administer their rival polio vaccines to children in 1955 and 1966 respectively



## Fear and loathing in 50s America

The “real bastards” who declared war on polio – and one another

For a 40-year period beginning in 1916, polio was one of every parent's worst nightmares: it could drop without warning into any home and paralyse or kill a child overnight. Paralysis might affect just one hand, or every muscle from the neck down – in which case artificial respiration (for example with the iron lung) was needed to keep the patient alive.

In America, the wealthy used to desert cities in advance of the polio season each summer; and in 1953, polio was second only to the atomic bomb as the average American's greatest fear. The cause was known to be a small gut virus, but every treatment tried – including vitamin C, electric shocks and branding the back of a paralysed child with a red-hot poker – proved useless. Experimental vaccines were developed during the 1920s, but these either failed or proved dangerous.

During the 1950s, two brilliant American scientists were locked in a ruthless race to

perfect their own polio vaccines. Jonas Salk (1914–95) inactivated polioviruses using formalin (embalming fluid), and finally produced an injectable ‘dead’ polio vaccine that was tested in 1954 in more than 1.8 million American and Canadian school-children. The outcome – “It works and is safe” – was announced to an international media frenzy in April 1955. Church bells were rung across America, and Salk became a cult figure.

Meanwhile, Albert Sabin (1906–93) was still working on his alternative vaccine. This used live polioviruses that he had attenuated in the lab, and was given orally. Sabin resented Salk's success and repeatedly mocked him as a “kitchen chemist”. Neither man behaved well, leading one distinguished American historian to describe them as “a pair of real bastards”. Sabin's oral polio vaccine was introduced in 1965, by which time Salk's vaccine had almost eliminated polio from America.

Neither vaccine is perfect, but both can be highly effective. Sabin's vaccine largely superseded Salk's because it is cheaper and easier to administer, especially in large-scale vaccination programmes. Using both vaccines, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative has almost wiped out polio. In 1988, there were nearly 500,000 cases of paralytic polio worldwide; so far this year, there are fewer than 500, all in Afghanistan or Pakistan. **H**

**Gareth Williams** is an emeritus professor of medicine at the University of Bristol. His books include *Paralysed with Fear: The Story of Polio* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Unravelling the Double Helix: The Lost Heroes of DNA* (W&N, 2019)

### LISTEN

Melvyn Bragg and guests discussed the history of immunisation on BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time*.

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## // Does every generation have to prove itself in Britain? //



In the latest series of *Three Pounds in My Pocket*, BBC journalist **Kavita Puri** explores the experiences of South Asians in Britain in the 1990s and beyond. Here she talks to Rob Attar about a golden age that couldn't last

**The latest series of your documentaries on South Asians in Britain centres on the 1990s. Would it be fair to describe this as a golden age?**

Yes, the 1990s were absolutely the golden age, and that's how the people that I interviewed talked about it. The programme is called *Three Pounds in My Pocket* because when the generation that came over in the 1950s and 1960s arrived, they could only bring as little as £3. By the time you get to the nineties, it's really the children of the £3 generation who are coming of age. They were in their twenties and had a very different relationship to Britain. Many were born here, this was their country, and by the nineties, they were navigating their way, and their identity, in Britain. For so many of them, it was a mixture of home life – which may still have had ties back to the mother country, whether it was India, Pakistan or Bangladesh – and also Britain. The 1990s was really a wonderful decade for expression in terms of music and film, and culture generally.

**What were some of the main cultural expressions of the British South Asian community at this time?**

In my last series, I talked about daytimers – underground clubs that British South Asians went to so they could listen to music and dance. But the events would take place in the middle of the day, partly because their parents might not have let them go to night-clubs, but also because people didn't want British South Asians going to clubs as they thought there would be fights, or that their kind of 'English' punters wouldn't turn up. They also thought British South Asians wouldn't drink, so they wouldn't make a lot of money.

By the early nineties, there were one-off gigs of Bhangra music or maybe a mixture of western and eastern music. But then in 1993 something really big happened: Bombay Jungle began at the Wag Club in Soho. Tuesday nights were dedicated to British South Asian music, and, from early on, hundreds of people were lining up to get in. It was a real mix: Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati – often university students. And people did drink, and they often wore western clothes. All these different communities dancing and listening to their music together was a really special time.

**Did the second generation of British South Asians see their dual identity as a positive**

**thing, or did they find themselves caught between the two?**

Everyone felt differently. What you've got to remember is that people who were coming of age in the 1990s had been living in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, which was a really hard time to be British South Asian. It was normal for people to be very overtly racist – whether that was people saying things, or the National Front chasing you down the street. And if your mum was wearing a sari, for example, you really stuck out, when many people just wanted to blend in. But by the 1990s, people had a bit more confidence in their identity, and, because a lot more money was going into the arts and culture sector, people from the second generation were meeting each other and sharing their experiences.



**Cultural icons** British South Asian culture became popular in the nineties. Composer Talvin Singh bagged the Mercury Music Prize (above) in 1999, and Cornershop (below, in 1994) topped the charts in 1997

**PREVIOUS PAGE:**

Rani Kaur, AKA DJ Radical Sista, was a fixture at the Bradford daytimers in the late 1980s. In the nineties, British South Asian club nights were launched, with "different communities dancing and listening to their music together"

One of my interviewees talks about there being this kind of no man's land where you weren't like your parents, because you weren't born on the Indian subcontinent, but you didn't quite feel like the people who you were at school or university with, who had many generations in this country. So I think it was a time when people were trying to find their voice – for want of a better way of describing it – and they really, really did.

At the beginning of the 1990s, British South Asian culture was absolutely not part of the mainstream – nobody wanted to identify with being British South Asian. But by the end of the decade, I'm not saying it was mainstream, but many of my interviewees felt it was kind of cool: 'Brimful of Asha' [by Cornershop] was number one in the charts; Talvin Singh won the Mercury Music Prize; and everyone knew about *Goodness Gracious Me*. By the end of the decade, everyone – whether British South Asian or English – could identify with that culture, and it felt more natural to have that coexistence.

**Did any tensions develop between the generation who had come to Britain, and their children who were assimilating more with mainstream British culture?**

The generational aspect is really interesting, and something people rarely talk about. Generational differences are always big, but when you're second generation from an immigrant family, you really feel it because your cultural references and your experiences are so very different from those of your parents. A lot of people in the second generation have never told their parents – to this day – about the kind of racist abuse they experienced, and a lot of people in the first generation never really talked about how hard it was for them when they arrived here. The first generation still held ties to the motherland, and they wanted to keep their heads down. They were happy to be here, but they wanted to survive here, whereas the second generation didn't just want to survive. Why should they just *survive*? This was their country. They fought for their rights, and they were much more vocal about it.

Sometimes there were clashes – over obvious things like who you go out with, what you listen to, and all the kind of stuff that's normal within generations. But it was much more pronounced within second generations of immigrant families. We had a conversation with one family which left us all in tears, because it brought home how

differently the first and second generation see progress. Farah was in her early twenties in the 1990s, and progress for her was meeting some wonderful people from a writers' collective with whom she could share her experiences of being British South Asian. She was in Liverpool while her parents were in London, and no one was telling her what she could and couldn't do. But her mother, Runi, found it really difficult that Farah had left London to go to university and then decided after she graduated that she wouldn't come back. Runi said that the phone call where her daughter told her she wouldn't be returning left her heartbroken, because she had never imagined when she came to this country that her daughter would leave her. And she describes how she took herself off to Kent, to the sea, and wept.

#### **How big a milestone was the 1997 general election?**

A lot of the people I spoke to had grown up under Thatcher, and both her premiership and that of Major had seen big curbs on immigration. But when New Labour came in, there was a very different sense of what it was to be British. Tony Blair talked of the 21st century being a battle of progress against forces of conservatism, and in his early speeches he almost described a post-racial society. He was saying that to be British was not even about race anymore. And famously in 2001, foreign secretary Robin Cook talked about chicken tikka masala being the national dish. So to be British felt very inclusive. And a lot of British South Asians talk about feeling welcomed for the first time.

#### **This is an era that's often seen as the highpoint of multiculturalism, but was that always the case on the ground?**

Not always, and it's important to point out that the term 'multiculturalism' had been around in the 1980s as well. But in the nineties, while we talk about it being a golden period, there was always an undercurrent, and the murder of Stephen Lawrence [a black 18-year-old who was stabbed to death in London by a group of white youths] in 1993 was something that had a profound impact on people in the South Asian community. They felt that this could have been them, if they had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. All my interviewees remember it. One was just six at the time, and she recalls her father having the conversation with her



**Path to peace** Asian community leaders steer a procession in London in 1976 calling for racial harmony after Gurdip Singh Chaggar was stabbed to death

## **// When New Labour came to power during the mid-nineties, there was a very different sense of what it was to be British //**

about race: "You're different. You look different. And if you ever get into trouble, you need to go into a shop or you need to look for an ally to protect you."

The way people talked about Stephen Lawrence reminded me of an event in the second series when an 18-year-old Sikh boy called Gurdip Singh Chaggar was murdered in the streets of Southall in 1976. Every British South Asian remembers that, because it's what they feared. So even though the 1990s were better, the Stephen Lawrence murder happened, and attacks were also on the rise in some areas where there were high numbers of British South Asians.

By 2001 it was clear that the Blair vision of a modern, post-racial Britain was not something felt by everyone – and not always felt by people within the British South Asian

community. If you look at northern industrial towns, there were groups of people in places like Bradford or Oldham who didn't feel that *that* Britain represented *their* Britain. We're talking about places where there may have been up to 50 per cent unemployment. And there was another group who felt disenfranchised: people who flocked to the far right. They didn't feel multicultural Britain was for them either.

In the late spring of 2001 riots broke out. The reasons are really, really complicated, but the report into the Oldham riots stated that there were these parallel groups of people living virtually segregated lives who had been let down by the authorities.

#### **At the other side of the extremism axis, the 1990s saw the growth of Islamist fundamentalism in Britain. What do you see as the roots of that?**

One of the people I interviewed was a man called Rashad from Sheffield, and he recalls [the fundamentalist Islamist group] Hizb ut-Tahrir coming to his school and giving an assembly, which I was quite surprised at. And he said that they weren't talking about extremist things: they were talking about what it meant to be a Muslim. At this time questions were coming up for some Muslims about whether they were Muslim or part of the South Asian community. For people like Rashad, who was recruited while he was at school, he said it was very normal to have questions about Islam and Islamic ideology. It wasn't a threat.

He was watching what was happening on the news, in places like the former Yugoslavia. He recalls leaflets being given out at his mosque using what happened in Srebrenica [where 7,000 Bosnian Muslims were murdered by Bosnian Serbs] as a way to recruit people. I'm not talking about large numbers of people, but there were some within the South Asian Muslim community who identified more with Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya or Palestine than they sometimes did with their British South Asian brethren.

#### **The 9/11 attack is a key moment in this narrative. What did it mean for the British South Asian community?**

From the early 1980s onwards, the British South Asian community had been starting to fragment for various reasons. There was the Amritsar massacre in 1984 [where thousands of Sikhs in India were murdered following the assassination of prime minister Indira

Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard] that saw some Sikhs separate themselves from other parts of the community. And then when the protests happened against Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* [in 1988], some Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus wanted to differentiate themselves from the Muslims who were protesting. But what you see with 2001 is the British Hindus and Sikhs really moving away.

Some of our contributors who are Muslim can recall that very distinctly. One of my interviewees, who'd arrived in Britain in 1957, told me something very interesting. He said: "When we arrived, we were seen as black, because blacks and South Asians were all kind of lumped together. And then I was seen as Asian, a kind of amorphous word. And then I was seen as Muslim. But when 9/11 happened, I was seen as a terrorist."

So we see these splits happen, but we also see the end of the golden period, this flourishing when people were proud to wear their British South Asian identity on their sleeves. After 9/11, people recoiled again. Whether you were Muslim, Hindu or Sikh, you didn't want to put your head above the parapet. There was a backlash against the Muslim community, but initially there was also a backlash against the Sikh community. If you had brown skin, people didn't ask whether you were Muslim, Sikh or Hindu. All the kinds of things that people had heard before came back again. It really did reverse the clock in terms of the progress that had been made up until that point.

#### **How do you think the dramatic events of the past few years have affected the British South Asian community?**

Some of these events have made people question their place in Britain. It's worth noting that a significant minority of British South Asians voted for Brexit, but after the referendum there was an uptick in attacks. And people I spoke to said that things they hadn't heard for a long time – like "go home" – started to reappear. A question that emerges from the programmes I've been making is whether progress is linear, or does each generation have to prove itself in Britain? And there is a sense that maybe it's the latter, because you think you're settled and things are going well and then 9/11 or Brexit happens, and you have to prove yourself once more.

Then something else we couldn't have anticipated – the Black Lives Matter

movement – happened, and this has changed things in a way I hadn't expected. One of my interviewees said the murder of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter had the same profound effect on his daughter as the murder of Stephen Lawrence had had on him growing up in the 1990s. It prompted the conversation about being different in this country, looking different and what that means. But his daughter also wanted to know, interestingly, about her history, which he couldn't answer.

This is the kind of conversation Black Lives Matter has thrown up for British South Asians. Battles were fought and won by the first and second generations, and legislation is on the statute book, but what is happening now – which is something one of my regular

**// After 9/11, people recoiled again. Whether you were Muslim, Sikh or Hindu, you didn't want to put your head above the parapet //**

#### **LISTEN**

Series 4 of **Three Pounds in My Pocket** (produced by Ant Adeane) begins on BBC Radio 4 on 8 January. You can catch-up with the previous three series at: [bbc.co.uk/programmes/b065z2x3](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/b065z2x3)



#### **Coming together**

Muslim women embrace after Ramadan ends, 2012. Kavita Puri argues that British South Asian history is part of what it means to be British

contributors, Professor Gurharpal Singh, always talks about – is a kind of post-colonial struggle where everything is up for grabs. He says it's not just about anti-discrimination, but it's now part of the so-called culture war. We're really talking about what Britain is and the stories that it tells itself. What does it mean to be British?

When Professor Singh talks about everything being up for grabs, I think he's referring to things like decolonising the curriculum: whose version of history are we telling? I feel that this is the next phase of race relations, and a big part of it, funnily enough, is about the kind of history I've been telling with this series, which, as I have always argued, is British history.

#### **Black Lives Matter has brought a lot more attention on to black history in Britain. Do we also need a similar focus on British South Asian history?**

We do. In the last census, there were over 3 million British South Asians in our country, and the histories of Britain and the Indian subcontinent are so intertwined over many centuries. To me, it is inevitable that at some point we have to learn about British South Asian history, because it's British history. How can you talk about why there are so many British South Asians if you don't understand about empire? Because if you don't understand empire, you don't understand why the migration happened, or know about the 1948 Nationality Act that meant every single member of the empire and the Commonwealth was automatically a British citizen – which remained the case until 1962.

So I think it is inevitable – whether it's in five years or it's in 10 years. We have to learn about it because we all need to know about this history. **H**

**Kavita Puri** is a BBC journalist and broadcaster. As well as the radio documentary *Three Pounds in My Pocket*, she also presented the BBC Radio 4 series *Partition Voices* and authored an accompanying book of the same name

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## The battle for Sicily, 1943

### Up in smoke

American B17s bomb the port of Messina in June 1943, in preparation for the invasion of Sicily. The operation provided the western Allies with a priceless toehold on Italian territory ahead of an assault on mainland Europe

# BACK WITH A BANG

GETTY IMAGES

The invasion of Sicily in 1943 marked the Allies' return to 'Fortress Europe' – and, despite hellish terrain and an obdurate enemy, ended in victory in just 38 days. So why, asks **James Holland**, is the operation chiefly remembered for its failings?

## The battle for Sicily, 1943

**T**he mountain-top town of Centuripe had proved a tough nut for the Allies to crack. The artillery had been forced to advance, completely exposed, to near the foot of the town, dodging enemy shelling and navigating the smashed road in search of somewhere to deploy that offered even a modicum of cover. Once they had finally done so, however, they were able to give the attacking infantry the support they needed, and by late on 3 August 1943 the town had fallen. The 3. Fallschirmjäger [Paratroop] Regiment then pulled back, down into the Salso Valley and up to the next town of Adrano – ready to do it all over again.

Major Peter Pettit, second-in-command of the 17th Field Artillery Regiment, had the unenviable task of trying to work out how he was going to get all 24 of his 25-pounder field guns up to Centuripe, down the other side and then repeat the gruelling ordeal they had just gone through. Centuripe itself was old, smashed about and, with tiny, twisted streets, not suited to large Quad gun-tractors towing an ammunition limber and the gun itself. And these behemoths were competing with a further 80-odd guns of various sizes, as well as tanks, trucks and other vehicles, that all needed to pass through the town.

Early in the morning of 4 August, Major Pettit and his opposite number in the 57th Field Artillery went down the only road leading out of Centuripe to try and work out how to achieve this logistical miracle. Winding, narrow and with numerous switchbacks, it was also in full view of the enemy, who had now dug in on the lower slopes of Mount Etna on the far side of the Salso Valley. Halfway down, a large part of the road had been destroyed, but it was too dangerous to repair in daylight; it would have to wait until dark.

Recognising it was quite impossible to move until night fell, Pettit headed back up to Centuripe and then brought down reconnaissance parties to where he thought they should deploy that night. Once darkness had fallen, 6,000 rounds of ammo were brought down, and then the convoy of Quads and guns began rumbling down, nose to tail, before inching round a diversion hastily built by the engineers around a blown section of road and finally getting into position for first light. Pettit had had just two and a half hours sleep, but he was now forced to frantically try to get the guns in place and camouflaged as much as possible before the sun rose high enough to show their every movement. Three lorries following behind the guns were hit by enemy shelling and exploded.

After days of bitter fighting, Allied infantry forced the enemy back from their positions at Centuripe – but these were just



### Physically draining

Unbearable heat and debilitating diseases took a terrible toll on those who fought for Sicily, as American infantryman Audie Murphy (above) discovered

some of the challenges that were faced by those fighting in Sicily.

A Baedeker guide warned travellers never to visit the island in July or August, when temperatures were unbearably hot, yet those were the months in which the battle took place. “The sun became an implacable enemy,” noted the Canadian lieutenant Farley Mowat, “and our steel helmets became brain furnaces.” The island was also rife with malaria, dysentery and other debilitating diseases. “My brain swam,” recalled the American infantryman Audie Murphy, “and my internal organs rumbled. Finally, I could take it no longer. I fell out of the ranks, lay down on the roadside, and heaved until I thought I would lose my stomach.”

There was little mains water outside of the cities, and many of the rivers were dry. In between were wide open plains and endless hills and mountains, linked by a narrow web of insufficient roads. Sicily was ideal for defence and a nightmare for any attacker, and yet the Allies took the island in just 38 days.

### Hustled out of the war

July and August 1943 would prove a critical period in the war in southern Europe. Mussolini was overthrown, Sicily subdued and a path paved for an invasion of mainland Italy. But despite these achievements, something of a black mark has remained against the assault on Sicily. Successive historians have condemned the Allies for the initial plan, their subsequent slow progress, and, finally, for allowing nearly 40,000 Germans to escape back across the Strait of Messina to reinforce the defence of the mainland. It's time, however, that such a view was kicked

## SICILY WAS IDEAL FOR DEFENCE AND A NIGHTMARE FOR ANY ATTACKER. THE ALLIES' CAUTION WAS ENTIRELY JUSTIFIED



**Scene of the action** Our map shows the Allied invasion of Sicily (9 July–17 August 1943). Some 160,000 men were dropped or landed on the southern coast, eventually driving more than 100,000 Axis troops off the island



### Heave-ho

Allied troops unload supplies on a Sicilian beach, July 1943. The attackers needed to get 6,000 tonnes of materiel ashore a day, with few ports available

very firmly into touch.

The decision by the Allies to invade Sicily was initially made at the Casablanca conference in January 1943, a meeting between British and American war leaders to thrash out a strategy to win the war in the west. By this time, they knew they must surely win in north Africa, and although it had been agreed that they would attempt a cross-Channel invasion of France the following year, there were very good reasons for invading Sicily. It would mean Allied troops would once more be back on European soil; it would help hustle Italy out of the war (if north Africa did not achieve that strategic goal); and it would further tighten the noose around Nazi Germany. Considerable forces had been built up in north Africa and the Mediterranean, and they could not sit back and do nothing until the following spring.

Despite complex deception plans, from incriminating bodies being dropped off the Spanish coast to sabotage operations in Greece – all engineered to suggest the Allies were going to invade Sardinia and Greece – simple logic pointed to Sicily. Certainly, this was what Mussolini and the Italian war leaders thought, and it was what Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, the German commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, also believed.

The idea that Sicily was the obvious next target was based on the simple fact that command of the air over the invasion front was a pre-requisite for any amphibious

invasion. This meant not only having bombers available but fighter aircraft too, which would be needed to fly protective high cover. The presence of Allied air bases on Malta and in northern Tunisia meant this could be only effectively achieved over Sicily: Sardinia and Greece were simply too far away.

Planning for Husky, codename for the invasion of Sicily, began immediately after the Casablanca conference, but by the time a plan for the assault was agreed upon, it had already gone through eight different variations. The ninth iteration of the plan was accepted on 3 May 1943. It was a mind-bogglingly complex operation and drawn up while having absolutely no idea what the enemy reaction would be, or in what strength German units might be sent to Sicily. Italian forces had fought well in Tunisia and had held up the Eighth Army very effectively at Enfidaville (in north-east Tunisia) in April 1943. There was a concern that they might fight even harder on Sicily, since they would now be doing so on Italian soil. The Germans, they knew, would fight determinedly.

And the shape of Sicily and the location of airfields and ports, which were spread around the island, was another thorny matter. Somehow, the Allies needed to get 6,000 tonnes a day ashore, even though most of the island's ports would not be available. The air commanders wanted troops to swiftly capture the airfields on the

west, south and south-east all at once. On the other hand, the army wanted to land on as narrow a front as possible and quickly build up supplies from there. In other words, the differing Allied forces had entirely contradictory requirements.

In the end, a compromise was agreed. The British and Canadians would land on the south-east coast and head straight to the ports of Syracuse, Augusta and then Catania, and from there on to Messina as quickly as possible, while the Americans would land on the central southern stretch around Gela. It meant the airfields there and in the south-east could be captured swiftly, but not those in the west. Air power alone would have to deal with those.

### Control of the air

For all the various planning drafts, there was no doubt that the one decided upon was the best in the circumstances and the one that gave the Allies the best chance of success. Nor should the Allied planners be criticised for the final plan's evolution when developing an

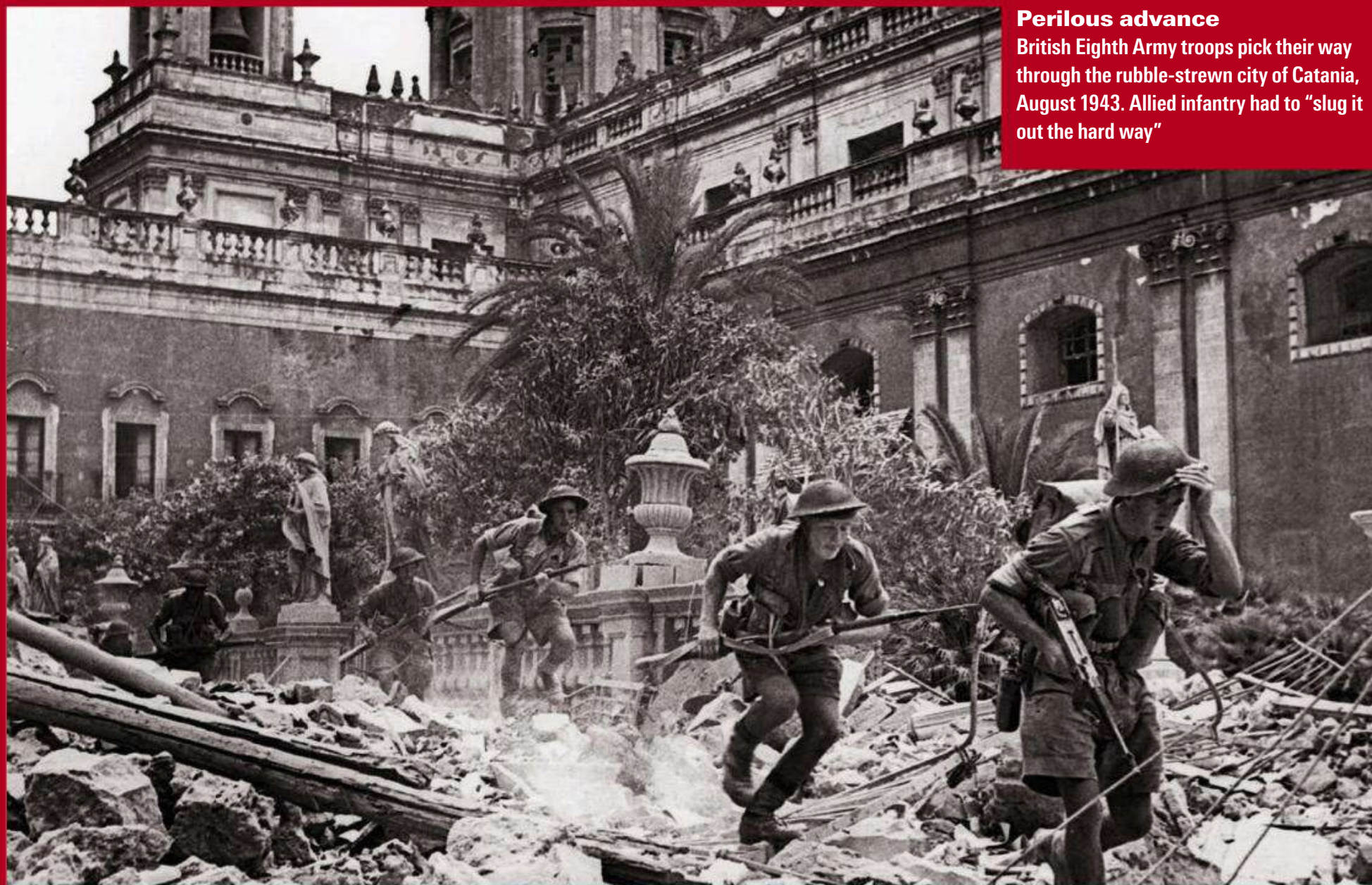
operation so complex; most major offensive operations in the war – from the German attack in the west in 1940 to Overlord, the invasion of Normandy – went through a number of drafts.

As it happened, many of the concerns raised during planning were resolved by the start of the operation, not least because

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## The battle for Sicily, 1943



### Perilous advance

British Eighth Army troops pick their way through the rubble-strewn city of Catania, August 1943. Allied infantry had to “slug it out the hard way”



### Heroes' welcome

Residents of the Sicilian capital of Palermo greet US Sherman tanks, July 1943. That the Allies managed to conquer Sicily in just 38 days was a remarkable achievement, argues James Holland

Allied air power before – and during – the invasion was spectacularly effective. This moment in the war saw the emergence of a new, sophisticated marriage of overwhelming Allied air power working together with naval and land power. Bombers pummelled airfields, railways and lines of supply in Sicily but also far beyond as well, while fighters engaged enemy planes. By 10 July 1943, the Axis air forces had been largely neutralised. In fact, over the summer, the Luftwaffe lost 3,504 aircraft in the Mediterranean. By comparison, they lost 702 on the eastern front. The Allied dominance certainly ensured that, when the invasion was launched, the threat from enemy airfields in the west of the island was considerably reduced.

Such success in the air was not so certain at the time of planning. The most important factor at this stage of the war was to ensure the landings were successful. There could be no reverses. It also meant that General Alexander (army group commander for Tunisia, Sicily and then Italy) agreed with Bernard Montgomery (commander of the Eighth Army) to land as many troops as possible to ensure a bridgehead was quickly established and that no effective attempt to repel them could be mounted.

That too, however, involved even more compromises, because for all the impressive build-up of troops and supplies in the Mediterranean, there was still a limit to how much shipping and landing craft was available. Large numbers of troops could only be landed at the expense of large numbers of vehicles – the kind of vehicles that would then transport troops quickly up to Catania and beyond. In the end, 160,000 men were dropped or landed – more than on D-Day the following year – along with 14,000 vehicles and supported by 2,590 vessels and 3,462 aircraft.

### **Bloated bodies**

As events turned out, the British landings were easier than had been feared. But Allied caution was entirely justified when mounting an operation of such scale, and when the cost of failure was simply unthinkable. Better to play safe than risk an upset that could have set the war back many months, if not longer.

There was a consequence, however. Because of the front-loading of troops, there was not enough motor transport to take the leading British units swiftly north. Rather, troops had to march north on foot, in sweltering heat, until transport could arrive in numbers over the following days – and going by foot, of course, took a lot longer than advancing by motorised transport.

In the meantime, the Germans on Sicily

## **ALLIED TROOPS WERE FORCED TO PRISE THE GERMANS FROM ONE HILLTOP TOWN AFTER ANOTHER, EACH A HERCULEAN STRUGGLE**

had been reinforced and resistance was, as a result, considerably stiffer. Nonetheless, the very real jeopardy that Husky would end in failure outweighed the necessity to move north towards Catania and Messina quickly.

The ponderous pace at which the Allies advanced has clouded their effort in Sicily ever since. As Italian resistance crumbled, the Germans were able to both substantially reinforce and regain their balance, falling back on a succession of defensive lines that initially ran west-east and which then covered the narrowing north-east corner. First the Catania Plain and then successive hilltop towns became scenes of brutal fighting. “The bodies are bloated,” wrote a German called Hanns Cibulka, “flies squat on the blood-crusted uniforms.”

The Primosole Bridge in the Catania Plain was a particularly deadly choke-point. Lieutenant David Fenner of the 6th Durhams jotted: “The air was thick with the stench of rotting bodies, explosives, smoke and lemons, the citrus scent heavy from the shredding the groves had received.” It was not far from here that the legendary England cricketer Hedley Verity was mortally wounded, leading a failed attack against the German *Hauptkampflinie* (main line of defence).

West and north of the plain, British, American and Canadian troops were forced to prise the Germans from one hilltop town after another, each a Herculean struggle, and each leaving the towns pummelled into rubble, with homes destroyed and civilians killed, wounded or turned into refugees. They were doing this, however, as quickly as supplies and the terrain allowed. The heat, the mountains, the narrow and often primitive roads, as well as the challenges of supply, disease and the casualties among front-line troops, all mitigated against a battle of rapid manoeuvre. Meanwhile, the Germans were struggling with ever-weakening air support, supply shortages and declining morale as it became increasingly clear that the island was

lost. The battle being fought had become one of buying time.

By the beginning of August, the *Hauptkampflinie* had been smashed, and the Americans at Troina and the British at Centuripe faced the next defensive lines. Firepower ground down the Germans, but it was the infantry, fighting on thin soil, and often exposed, that had to slug it out the hard way. Finally, by the second week of August, the Germans had fallen back behind Etna, but the tapering of the north-east of the island allowed them to hold ever-shortening defensive lines while the bulk began evacuating.

Although 39,569 Germans and 62,000 Italians escaped, only 25,000 of the Germans that left the island were fighting troops, and their four divisions on Sicily had been appallingly mauled. This escape has been nevertheless one of the biggest causes of Allied criticism.

Yet the history of the war shows that evacuations were generally pretty successful. At Dunkirk, 338,000 Allied troops escaped; 42,000 out of 46,000 British troops deployed were evacuated from Greece in 1941. That same year, nearly 19,000 of the 32,000 Allied troops on Crete were also evacuated. And at the end of the war, more than 2 million Germans were successfully evacuated from East Prussia and Danzig at a time when the Red Army was bearing down upon them. None of these evacuations took place at such a short crossing point as the Strait of Messina, which was little more than a mile wide, nor at a spot that was more densely defended: there were 333 anti-aircraft guns either side of the strait (compared with 135 along the Normandy coastline the following summer). It was impossible to stop them, and their escape made almost no difference to the Italian campaign that followed.

To stand today at the top of Centuripe, or any of the other mountain-top towns over which these bitter battles took place, is to marvel at how anyone managed to fight there at all. That they did so – in the first combined Allied assault of Fortress Europe – and managed to succeed at all was a remarkable achievement, and it should be remembered and better commemorated as such. **H**

James Holland is an author and broadcaster. His latest book, *Sicily '43: The First Assault on Fortress Europe*, was published in September by Bantam Press. James will be discussing the invasion of Sicily on our podcast: [historyextra.com/podcast](http://historyextra.com/podcast)

➤ Over the page, James reveals how the Allies applied the lessons they learned from the invasion of Sicily to D-Day

## FIVE SICILIAN LESSONS FOR D-DAY

Operation Husky provided the Allies with valuable learnings ahead of an even more momentous amphibious assault – on Normandy’s beaches in June 1944...

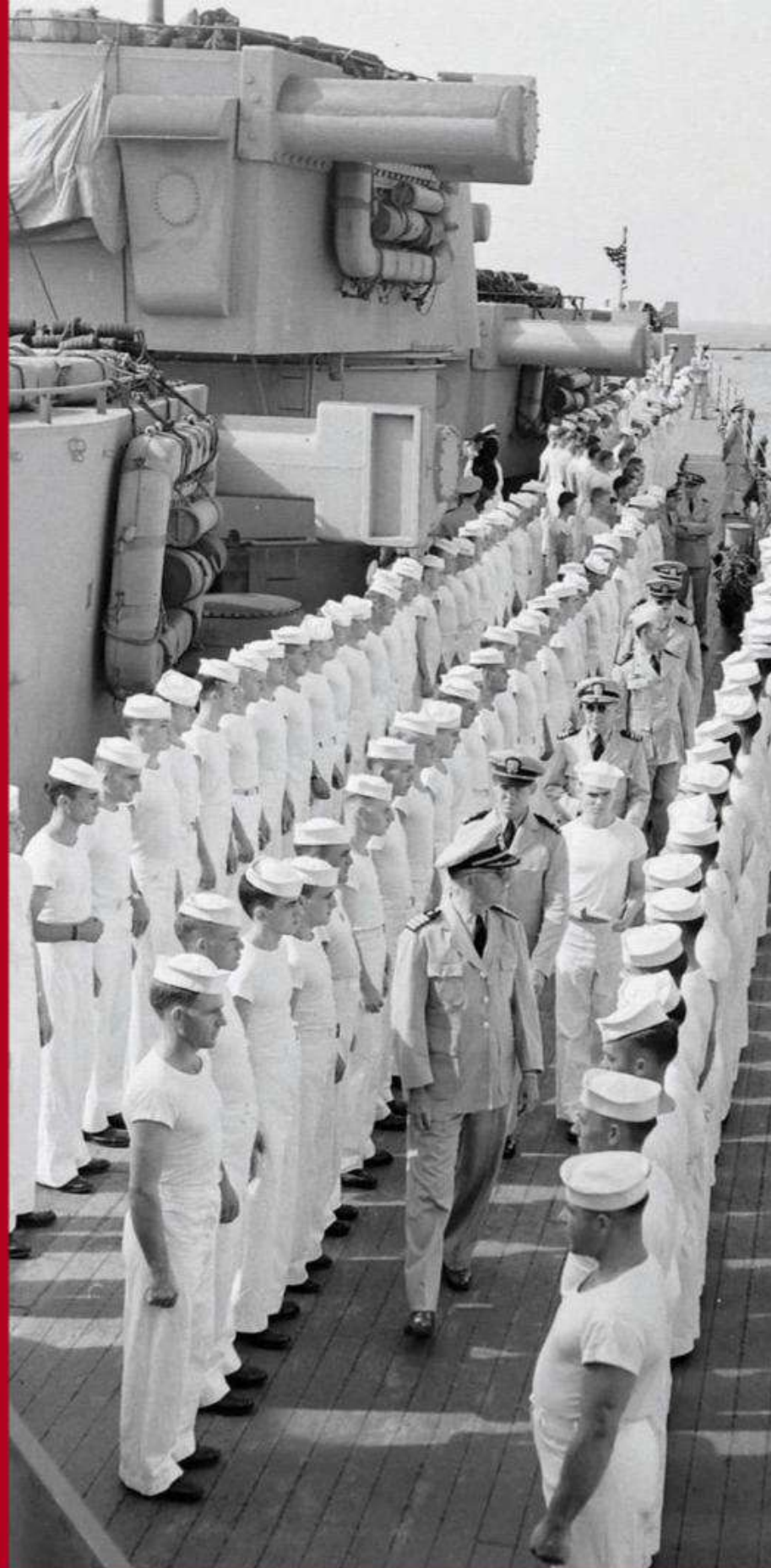
### 1. Don’t spin too many plates

Operation Husky was planned while the Tunisian campaign was in full flow, which meant the Allied commanders all had their hands full with the current battle while trying to organise the next. Too many plates were being spun at once, which made the success of the eventual plan for Sicily even more remarkable.

The lesson was learned,

however: for Overlord, the invasion of Normandy, all the principal commanders were withdrawn from frontline duties and told to concentrate fully on the task ahead of them. This included most of the air commanders and a number of the naval commanders, as well as Generals Eisenhower, Montgomery and Patton, all of whom had been involved in both Tunisia and Sicily.

Generals Eisenhower (left) and Montgomery (pictured reviewing a tank exercise, Salisbury 1944) were able to give D-Day their undivided attention



Sailors on a US warship in the waters off Sicily, 1943. Husky was a testing ground for tri-service operations

### 2. Work as a “brotherhood”

General Harold Alexander, who commanded the 15th Army Group for the capture of Sicily, pointed out that modern warfare needed to be a “brotherhood” of army, navy and air forces, working in tandem with one another. As was proved emphatically by Husky, this was essential for future operations, all of which would have to be mounted by sea and by air.

Air forces would hammer the enemy’s own air forces and lines of communication and then provide cover and

support for the naval forces, who would in turn offer not only fire support but enormous logistical support too. The army would be supported from the air as it cleared the land.

Sicily was the first major testing ground of both this new, completely tri-service method of warfare and of the Anglo-US coalition. By June 1944, this coalition of nations and services had been honed further and had become the accepted and entrenched Allied way of war.



A US paratrooper in training, 1943. Hitting landing zones proved a challenge for the Allies

### 3. Glide to victory

Early in the war, Britain and America had become dazzled by the possibilities of airborne warfare. By 1943, airborne troops were all superbly trained, but the means of delivering them to the battlefield had been given considerably less thought.

Glider pilots, those towing them and transport aircrew were all severely undertrained, and airborne operations on Sicily were a fiasco. Just four of 147 British gliders managed to land on the correct landing zones, with 69 ditching in the sea, while only around 200 of the 3,400 US 505th Parachute Infantry Team landed on their drop zones. Later, at

Primosole Bridge, only 16 per cent of the First Parachute Brigade actually fought there, the rest being scattered to the four winds.

Certain lessons were not learned – transport crews continued to be among the least proficient in the Allied air forces, but there was a major overhaul of glider training by D-Day. One of those many miles off course over Sicily had been Jim Wallwork; 11 months on, he performed one of the most precise and brilliant feats of any glider pilot when he landed precisely where he should have been at Pegasus bridge.

### 4. No port, no problem

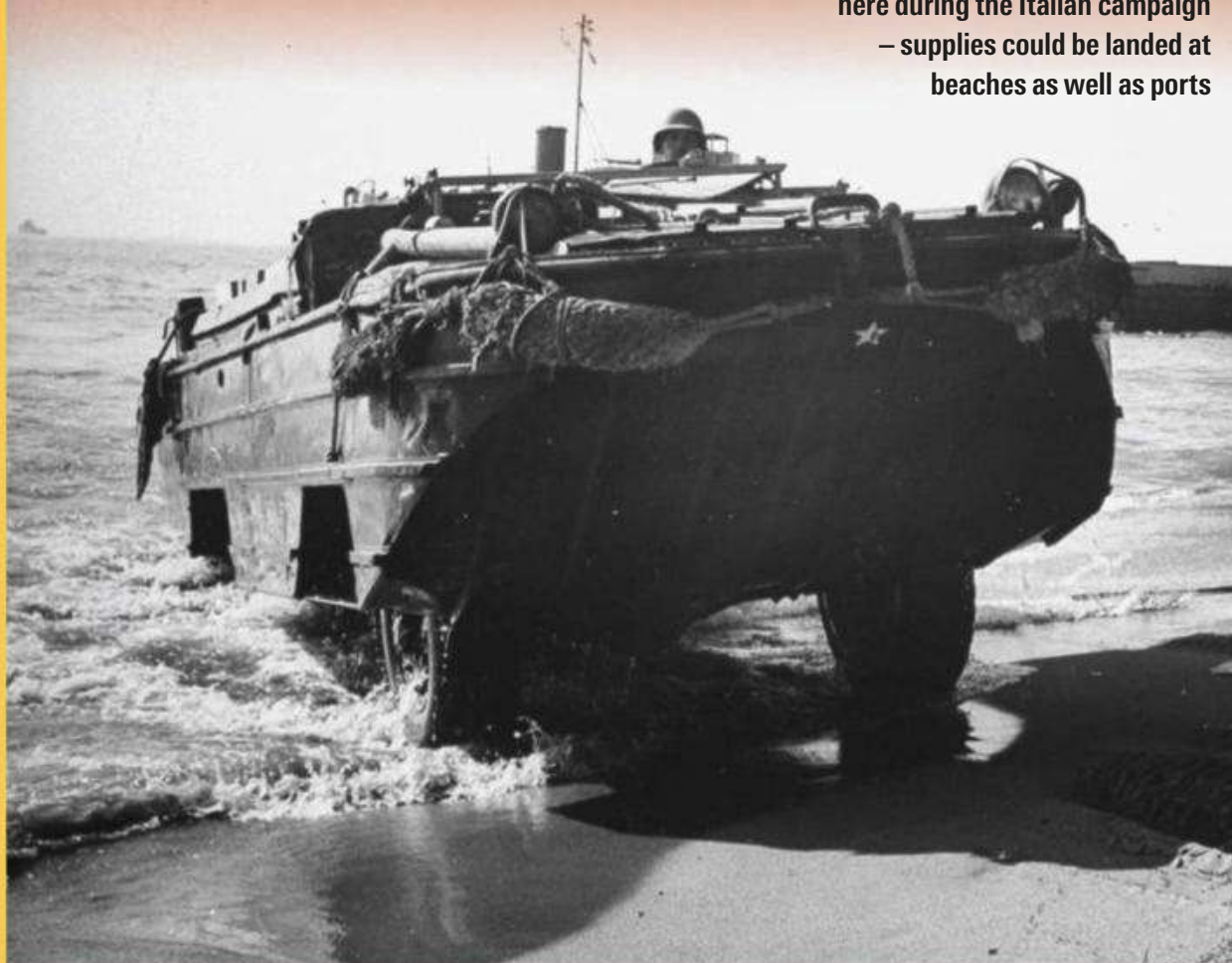
One of the biggest conundrums facing Allied planners before Husky was how to deliver enough supplies. The three biggest ports – Messina, Catania and Palermo – were all out of immediate reach of any invasion along the southern and south-east shores, and Sicily's other ports were nowhere near big enough to support the 6,000 tonnes of supplies needed every single day.

New developments in landing craft showed ports were not the be-all and end-all that planners had previously thought. The superb landing ships –

100 metres long and with a mere 4ft 7ins draught – performed much of the donkey work, as did makeshift steel pontoons and the ingenious DUKWs (pronounced “duck”) – amphibious vehicles that could be driven directly onto the shore and then back out to sea again.

These lessons meant that Normandy could go ahead without the need to capture a port – rather, most supplies were simply driven straight off landing craft and onto the beaches.

Thanks to DUKW amphibious vehicles – like the one pictured here during the Italian campaign – supplies could be landed at beaches as well as ports



General Patton inspects troops in Britain, April 1944. The US Army had by now proved its effectiveness

### 5. Trust the Americans

The US Seventh Army, which came into being on the night of D-Day for Husky, was the first American field army to go into action in the war. It was new to warfare and largely untested, yet in repelling a major counterattack at the city of Gela on 11 July, it proved it was quickly absorbing and learning the lessons of war.

Seventh Army's clearing of the western half of the island between 19 and 23 July provided a small test of fighting prowess, but a massive one of their operational skill. To clear so much ground in such a short space of time with the full gamut of trucks, half-tracks, tanks and motorised artillery in such brutal conditions was a vital test, and one they passed with flying colours. The US Army had proved it was a fine fighting machine, and so when it came to D-Day, it was given its due equal billing and share of operations. **H**

# Q&A

A selection of historical **conundrums** answered by experts

## When did people start considering themselves English?

▶▶▶ People started thinking of themselves as English long before there was any country called 'England'. In the eighth century, when the Anglo-Saxons still belonged to separate kingdoms, there was already a developing sense that they might all be one *gens Anglorum* ('people of the English' or 'Angles'), even if they were originally Saxons or Jutes. The historian Bede was an influential proponent of this idea.

But in the late ninth century, after the Vikings conquered many of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the question of who was English took on new political importance. The kings of the West Saxons – Alfred the Great and his descendants – began to assert that they ruled a kingdom "of the English", and they fought to create one by bringing the Viking-ruled regions under their power. They ultimately succeeded in this endeavour, although it took some time before the Scandinavian-descended

peoples who were living in northern England came to think of themselves as English too.

By the 11th century, *Englisc* was well established as the standard term for people from England. And after the Norman conquest, many of the Normans who had settled in England soon began to identify as English themselves. Even though they still spoke French and retained links to Normandy, by the 12th century they were calling themselves *les Engleis*, meaning 'the English'. They seem to have thought of English identity as something anyone living in England could adopt.

The definition of 'English' could expand, it seems, to include these newcomers, and that was how it managed to survive as a political identity even after the English were conquered.

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**Eleanor Parker**, lecturer in medieval English literature at the University of Oxford

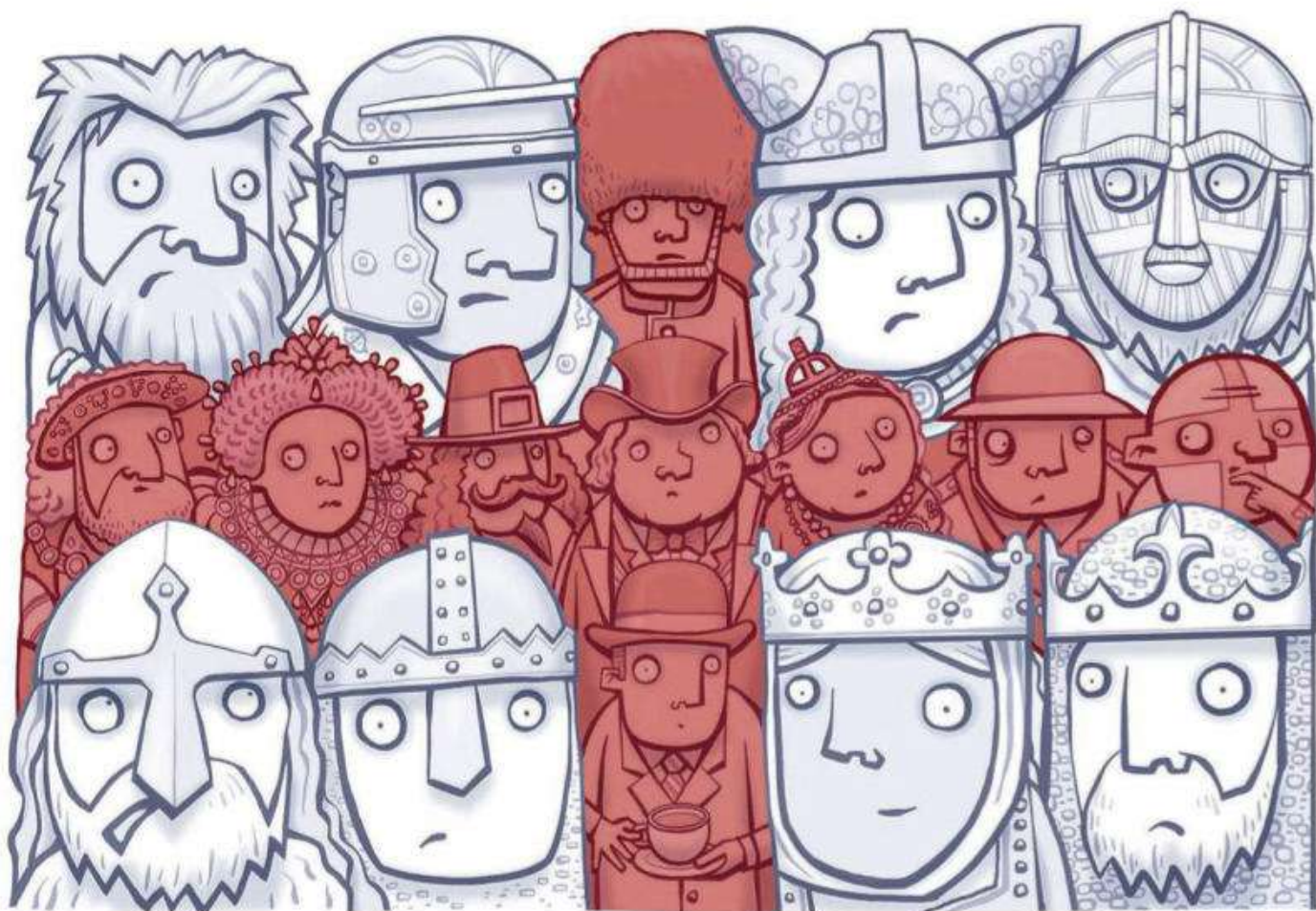
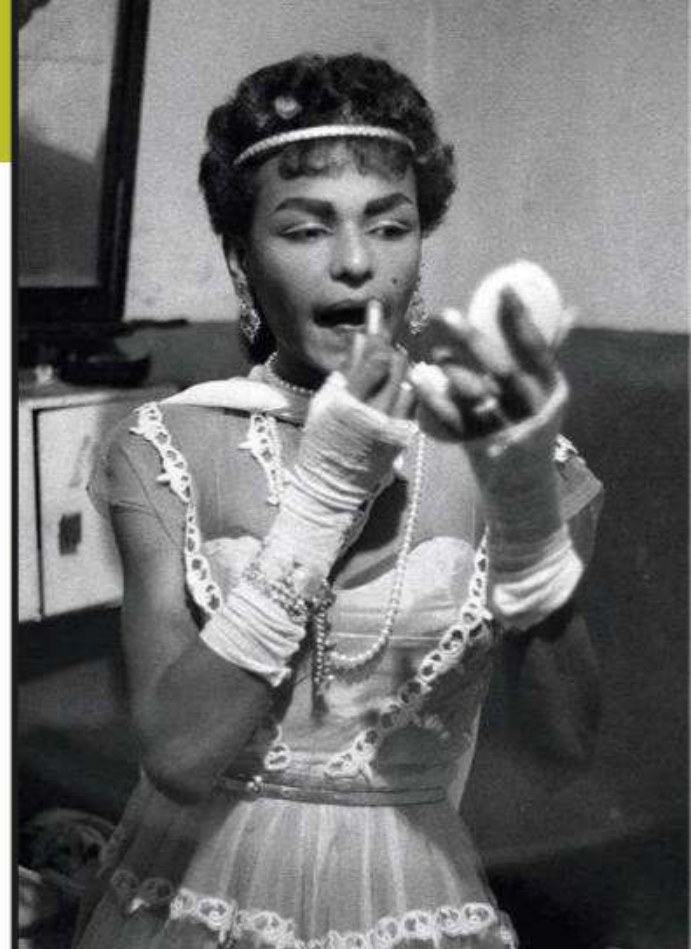


ILLUSTRATION BY GLEN MCBETH



A drag queen applies lipstick in this 1959 photograph. The term 'drag queen' was first used around 80 years earlier by William Dorsey Swann, a formerly enslaved African-American

## Who was the first person to call themselves a 'drag queen'?

▶▶▶ William Dorsey Swann, a formerly enslaved African-American, is the earliest-documented person to describe themselves as a 'queen' of a 'drag' – or 'drag queen'. In 19th-century Washington DC, Swann began hosting cross-dressing events that he and his male guests referred to as 'drags'. Among his friends, Swann became known as 'the Queen' because of his role as leader and organiser of these gatherings.

In 2020, most people now think of a 'drag queen' as any man who performs in women's clothing. But by that definition, drag queens have existed since ancient times: male stage actors performed female roles all around the globe, from Greek drama to Japanese kabuki. In 1870, two Englishmen, Thomas Ernest Boulton and Frederick William Park, caused an international scandal after being arrested for wearing women's attire in the streets of London. However, no one in the world appears to have called themselves a 'drag queen' until Swann began to do so in the 1880s.

.....  
**Channing Gerard Joseph**, author of *House of Swann: Where Slaves Became Queens*, which is forthcoming from Crown and Picador

MARY EVANS



Life in the Soviet Union was often a disappointment for western defectors. The disenchanted spies Edward Lee Howard (left, shown in 1995) and Kim Philby (below, pictured with his last wife, Rufina Pukhova, in the 1980s) turned to alcohol



## What happened to western spies who defected to the Soviet Union during the Cold War?

»»» A great many Soviets worked for western intelligence and settled in those countries once their espionage career was over. Far fewer western spies defected to the Soviet Union, but for those that did, it was often hard to give up the lives they had left behind.

Perhaps the most famous were three members of the Cambridge Five, the devastatingly effective spy ring that paralysed the British establishment in the 1950s and onwards. The first to defect, in the summer of 1951, were Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, and they were followed in 1963 by another true believer, Kim Philby. Philby lived in Moscow for 25 years (until his death), and while he remained a committed communist, he discovered that life in the Soviet Union was decidedly not what he had hoped for.

Although he assisted the KGB with

spy training and shared his knowledge of Britain with them, Philby became disillusioned with his new life, reading *The Times* newspaper regularly, drinking heavily, and lamenting: “Why do old people live so badly here?”

Edward Lee Howard, who had worked for the CIA before escaping in the mid-1980s, also settled in Moscow, where he too drank excessively and complained about the “rather dull life of an ex-spy”.

The reality was that, for most spies, the excitement of their work was in their espionage, and retirement could never quite live up to it. This applied to Russian spies defecting to the west, but it was particularly true of western spies defecting to the east.

.....  
**Michael S Goodman**, head of the department of war studies at King's College London

## DID YOU KNOW...?

### Flight of fancy

In 1898, a traveller named Louis de Rougemont, writing in *Wide World Magazine*, claimed to have seen wombats flying through the air in Australia. He also said he had, for decades, been the god-king of an indigenous tribe in the outback. Neither of these ‘facts’ was true. Although he had lived in Australia, **De Rougemont was** simply a teller of tall tales. Once his stories were exposed, he toured music halls billed as “the greatest liar on Earth”.



### Madcap inventor

The unlikely inventions of the English baronet Sir George Sitwell (1860–1943) included a musical toothbrush that played the song ‘Annie Laurie’, and a miniature pistol for the shooting of wasps. He also attempted to pay his son’s Eton school fees in the form of potatoes from his Derbyshire estate. The school refused them. His daughter, the writer Edith Sitwell, published a book called *English Eccentrics* – a subject with which she must have been very familiar from personal experience.

### Showered with kisses

It is estimated that 5 million women have kissed the lips of a 15th-century statue in Ravenna. The figure of Guidarello Guidarelli, a soldier who fought for Cesare Borgia, was sculpted soon after his death. In the 19th century a rumour started that any woman who kissed its marble lips was destined for a wonderful, loving marriage. So many did so over the ensuing decades that the statue eventually had to be placed in a glass cabinet to protect it. **H**

.....  
**Nick Rennison**, writer and journalist specialising in history



Guidarello Guidarelli’s marble statue, carved in c1525. Millions of women have kissed its lips

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**BBC** HiSTORY MAGAZINE

**Hero and villain**

LEFT: Anthony Stones' equestrian statue, from 1995, of Charles Edward Stuart in Derby portrays the prince at the peak of his powers, setting his sights on London

RIGHT: John Pettie's painting from c1892 depicts a Charles that his critics would recognise, haughtily entering the ballroom at Holyroodhouse

# Scottish superhero...

ALAMY



# or Italian coward?

To his admirers, Bonnie Prince Charlie was a valiant leader; to his detractors, a gutless popinjay. On the 300th anniversary of the Jacobite prince's birth, **Jacqueline Riding** endeavours to locate where the truth lies

**T**he 1745 Jacobite Rebellion came to a bloody end on 16 April 1746 at Culloden Muir near Inverness. Throughout the battle, Charles Edward Stuart (better known to posterity as Bonnie Prince Charlie) had been among his hungry and exhausted troops, shouting encouragement. The prince's prominence in the thick of it, surrounded by his horse guard, had made him a target for well-trained British-army gunners. Several officers nearby were wounded by the explosions, with one horse's hind leg left hanging from the skin. Charles was unhurt, but his face and clothes were splattered with mud.

As the Jacobite lines collapsed, signalling a total rout, all observers agree that Charles, the 25-year-old Jacobite leader, left the battlefield accompanied by a small mounted guard and some of his senior advisers. But, beyond this, the prince's escape has been a matter of great contention.

Colonel John William O'Sullivan, Charles's most trusted friend and councillor, watched in dread as British Army cavalry moved across the field to cut off the prince's retreat and implored him to retire immediately or be surrounded: "Well," said the prince, "they won't take me alive." William Home, a 14-year-old ensign at the time, later described how Charles was compelled to leave the battlefield "with the utmost reluctance, the bridle of his horse having been seized and forcibly turned about", in order to save him and the cause he embodied, his dynasty's restoration. The defeat at Culloden – the first suffered by the Jacobite army during the entire nine-month campaign – was, in itself, a disaster, but the capture or death of the Stuart prince would have been a catastrophe.

### **Saving his skin**

Others, however, far less sympathetic than O'Sullivan or Home, declared that, rather than standing firm with the intention to fight to the death, Charles refused point-blank to lead a last heroic charge. Worse still, he galloped off to save his own skin, to the terrible groans and screams of his injured and dying men. At this moment, in anger and despair, the Jacobite cavalry commander, David Wemyss, Lord Elcho, shouted a bitter rebuke as the prince receded from view: "There you go for a damned cowardly Italian!" Sir Walter Scott certainly believed this version, noting it in his diary, as the information had come from Sir James Stewart Denham, Lord Elcho's nephew.

Charles then, according to detractors, compounded his crimes by avoiding the

## **As the first Stuart male from the senior and Catholic branch since his father, Charles rejuvenated the Jacobite cause**

chosen Jacobite gathering point at Ruthven, due south of Culloden, instead issuing a few days later, via note rather than in person, the notorious order: Every man for himself.

With these words, Charles destroyed any hope of rallying his troops to fight another day, in the process abandoning them to the retribution of the British Army commander-in-chief, William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, and ushering in the violent pacification of the Highlands. Charles, meanwhile, scuttled off to the west coast to catch the first ship back to France. The "Frightened Italian Bravo" – echoing Lord Elcho – versus Cumberland's undaunted British hero became a familiar trope in anti-Jacobite prints published in the weeks, months and years following Culloden.

The dramatic variation in these recollections establishes more broadly the case for and against Charles Edward Stuart, which, to a large degree, remains with us still. On the plus side, a brave, charismatic man, audacious to the point of recklessness, a Scottish hero (the Stuarts or Stewarts being the ancient Scottish royal dynasty) in the mould of William Wallace and the prince's ancestor, Robert the Bruce – determined, against the odds, to try, try and try again. This Charles Stuart lingers in the inscription on the 19th-century cairn at Culloden battlefield, dedicated to "the Gallant Highlanders who fought for Scotland & Prince Charlie", and whose stone effigy, with its thousand-mile stare, stands atop the monument at Glenfinnan: the place where, in a thrilling moment early in the rising, Charles raised his standard to the wail of pipes.

For the prosecution, Charles is an emotionally distant and effete foreigner, indifferent to the suffering his rash restoration attempt was now unleashing on his followers. In the face of genuine danger, so this argument goes, he displayed shameful cowardice unbecoming of the ancient Scottish dynasty: a Stuart in name only, in fact, to those like Lord Elcho, barely Scottish at all.

This characterisation influenced Scott's famous novel *Waverley* (1814), set during the rebellion and, more overtly still, his *Tales of a Grandfather* (1828–30), both of which, in turn, inspired John Pettie's famous painting from c1892, *Bonnie Prince Charlie Entering the Ballroom at Holyroodhouse* [see page 63].

Certainly, you can imagine Pettie's popinjay prince, with his superior expression and penchant for Highland fancy dress, exiting the field at Culloden without a backward glance. This Charles Stuart makes a reappearance in Peter Watkin's extraordinary film *Culloden* (1964), based on John Prebble's account of 1961 and for whom Prebble acted as historical adviser. Here the gormless Charles feebly asserts his divine right to rule, even in the midst of defeat, with a bizarre pan-European accent. Diana Gabaldon's bestselling *Outlander* novels and the equally successful TV series that derive from them have reinvigorated, to a degree, this particular idea of Bonnie Prince Charlie.

### **Georgian "usurpers"**

As ever, both versions have elements based in fact. Charles was born in Rome on 20 December 1720 (according to the Julian calendar) at the Jacobite headquarters, the Palazzo del Re. His arrival rejuvenated the Jacobite cause as the first Stuart male, from the senior and Catholic branch, since the birth of his father, James Francis Edward in 1688. From this circumstance springs the greatest myth concerning their supporters (or Jacobites), that they were predominantly Catholic, alongside the misconception that the movement was essentially Scottish and 'nationalist'. In reality it was a broad coalition of different people and interests, from across the British Isles and beyond, for and against the Union of 1707, and as likely Anglican or Episcopalian Protestants as Roman Catholics. The only thing uniting them all was the desire to remove the "usurpers" (as they described George of Hanover, who ascended the British throne as George I in 1714, and his brood), and restore the Stuart dynasty. (For more on the Jacobites, see our box on p67).

Charles's home life was far from stable, with religion central to his parent's increasingly fractious relationship. Both James Francis Edward and Maria Clementina Sobieska were staunch Roman Catholics, but unlike his Polish wife, James knew that his pronouncements on religious toleration, as one cornerstone of a restored Stuart monarchy in Protestant Great Britain, meant allowing some freedoms for non-Catholic courtiers and exiles at the Palazzo del Re, including a chapel for worship. Maria Clementina entered a convent in protest, enlisting the support of the pope in this



### Lost cause

Jacobite troops clash with British Army redcoats at Culloden. The conduct of their leader at the climax of the uprising has been the subject of scrutiny for almost 275 years

### Pulling rank

The TV series *Outlander* casts Charles Edward Stuart (played by Andrew Gower, left) as a weak and foolish outsider

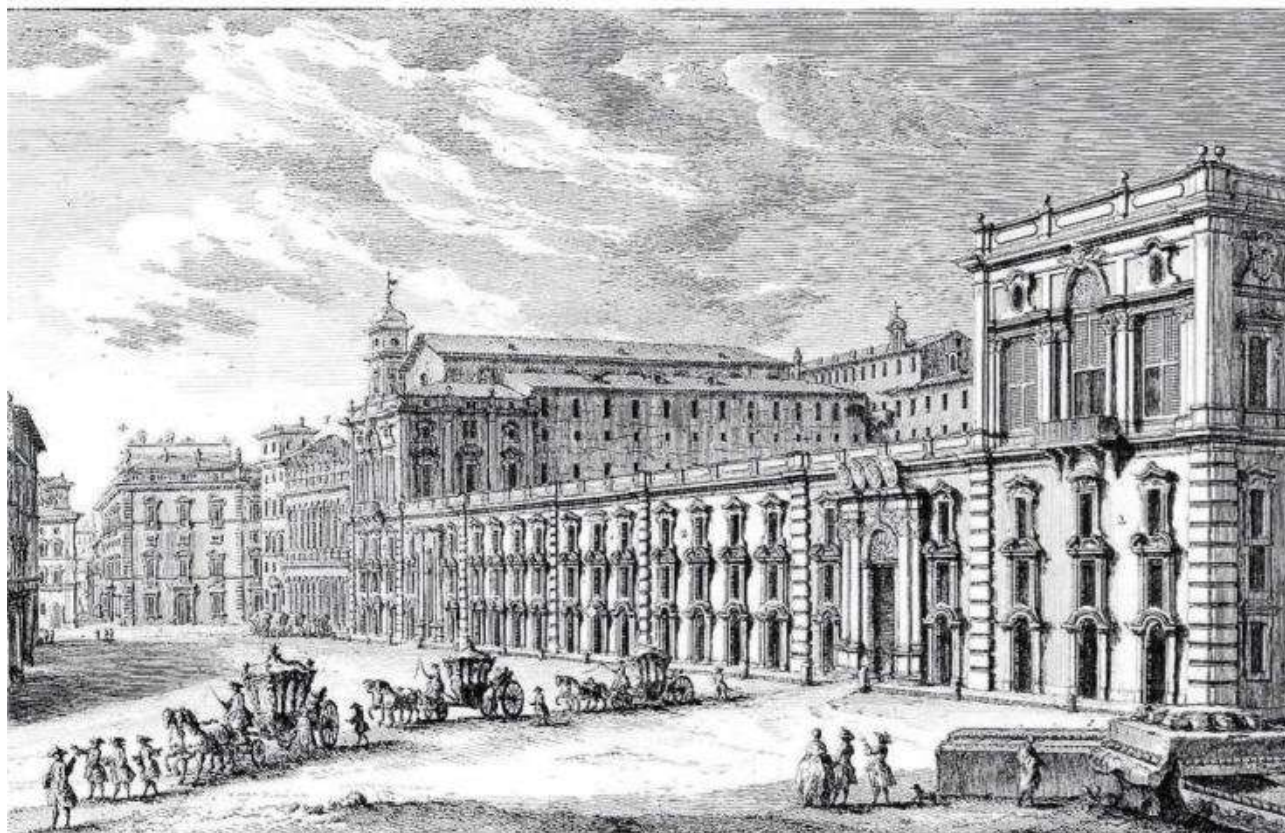


### A call to arms

Charles Edward Stuart dominates the landscape atop a monument at Glenfinnan in the Western Highlands. It was here that Charles raised his standard, signalling the official beginning of the Jacobite rising of 1745



## Bonnie Prince Charlie



**Life and death** Giuseppe Vasi's 18th-century engraving of the Piazza dei Santi Apostoli in Rome, with the Palazzo del Re (far left), where Charles Edward Stuart was born and died

damaging quarrel. The situation was only resolved on her death in 1735.

Aside from the emotional impact on the young Charles, this early experience seems to have distanced him from any strong allegiance to Catholicism. It also convinced him that his father's determination to be the Catholic ruler of his dominions – not converting for the sake of his country, as his ancestor Henry IV of France had done – was *one*, if not *the* barrier to their restoration.

In a similar vein, by whom and how the Stuart heir apparent should be educated was also rife with religious tensions. A Roman Catholic, born and raised in the heart of Catholicism and whose lifestyle was sponsored by the pope, was an obvious focus for British government propaganda. James eventually gave the vital role of the prince's tutor to James Murray, Earl of Dunbar, a Scottish Protestant, and then hedged his bets by appointing Sir Thomas Sheridan, an Irish Catholic, as deputy. The ongoing wrangles damaged any hope that Charles would receive a rounded education fit for the leader of a military campaign and, if successful, the future king of Great Britain and Ireland.

There is no evidence that Charles received any formal training in military theory, considered standard among his peers. Nor did he actively expand (through reading, for example) his knowledge of the nations he was, he believed, destined to rule – beyond, that is, imbibing the partial and increasingly nostalgic reminiscences of the exiles resident at the Jacobite court and its environs. The French author Charles de Brosses, after visiting the palazzo in 1739, observed that both Charles and his younger brother Henry Benedict (born 1725) “had but a mediocre wit, and are less polished than princes should be at their age”. In support of this, Lord Elcho recalled that “Lord Dunbar is a man of the world and should have been able to give him [Charles] a better education, which he is accused of having neglected; Sir Thomas Sheridan is an ardent papist with no knowledge of how England is governed, and who holds the loftiest notions about the divine right of kings and absolute power.”

The notion that the British people in their entirety, oppressed by the tyranny of the ‘Elector of Hanover’, were simply awaiting the arrival of their rightful prince, a delusion Charles seems to have laboured under, has its origins here.

Perhaps more troubling, in regard to his readiness for any restoration attempt or, indeed, assuming his ‘rightful’ position as Prince of Wales, Charles appears to have been kept away from the inner-workings of the Jacobite operation in Rome until, finally, when almost 20 years old, he joined his

### A couple at odds

Portraits of Charles's parents, James Francis Edward Stuart and Maria Clementina Sobieska. The young Charles's worldview was profoundly shaped by their disputes



**Slow learners?** Miniatures from c1734 showing Charles (left) and his younger brother, Henry Benedict Stuart. One French author observed that the brothers “had but a mediocre wit”

## The wrangling damaged any hope that Charles would receive an education fit for a king of Great Britain and Ireland

father's council. By this point, indulged by his loving but ill-advised parent, he had been abandoned for too long to his own inclinations and the advice and opinions of a small coterie of men, including his tutor Sheridan, which, as argued by Lord Elcho among others, would have a significant impact on his character, attitude and behaviour.

Charles's natural buoyancy was countered by a suspicious and even depressive streak, which manifested itself during the campaign of 1745. His Scottish commanders, admittedly after Culloden, accused him of treating them throughout the campaign in an autocratic manner, expecting absolute obedience and loyalty rather than earning their devotion and respect. If challenged he would take offence and then fall back on his inner circle, including O'Sullivan and Sheridan, who naturally agreed with him. But it is hardly surprising, given his early life in Rome – when he was perpetually watched by British government spies and informers – that he relied heavily on individuals who had proved their loyalty to him personally.

### Slim and elegant

Yet in some respects the Stuart prince was very accomplished. Through his passion for hunting he became a crack shot, an excellent horseman and had the stamina to take on the physical rigours of a military campaign. In other ways, too, Charles matched up to the ideal of a prince of the 'ancien régime'. He was a talented musician, an elegant dancer and his physical appearance – auburn hair, dark brown eyes, tall and slim-built – certainly helped.

Such was Charles's youthful appeal that supporters pondered on bypassing the world-weary father in preference for his handsome son. British government ministers were also regarding the young, rather than old 'pretender' as the one to watch.

Anyone who had been paying close attention to Charles could have predicted the



A painting of the battle of Glenshiel, which saw the British Army defeating a combined force of Highland troops and Spanish marines in the Jacobite rising of 1719

## IN CONTEXT: THE JACOBITES

A decades-long campaign to restore the Stuart dynasty

The terms Jacobitism and Jacobite come from the Latin for James, 'Jacobus', and refer to the movement to restore the **Stuart king and Catholic convert James II and VII** and his male heirs to the thrones of England, Ireland and Scotland (Great Britain and Ireland after the Acts of Union in 1707). James was deposed during the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 and replaced by his nephew and son in law, **William of Orange**, and his eldest daughter, **Mary**.

Early Jacobite military resistance occurred in Ireland and Scotland, but ended in defeat and James's exile in France. In 1701, acts of parliament were passed **confirming that Catholics were barred from the succession**, resulting – after the death in 1714 of James II's childless younger daughter, Queen Anne – in the **crowns passing to the Elector of Hanover**, George Louis.

By the 1710s, the religious and political crossover between Jacobites and Tories meant that many Whigs, who were supporters of the 'Glorious Revolution', saw the two as **essentially one and the same**. This became a self-fulfilling prophecy when, on the arrival

of George I and then II, the Tories spent decades in the political wilderness.

Meanwhile Jacobite hopes were focused on James's son, **James Francis Edward Stuart**, who personally led a restoration attempt in 1715. This failed, as did another attempt backed by Spain in 1719, after which the Jacobite court and headquarters moved to the Palazzo del Re in Rome.

After the rebellion of 1745, **Jacobite plots and French invasion attempts** in support of the Stuarts continued, but the British naval victory at Quiberon Bay in 1759 destroyed France's ability to launch an invasion for the foreseeable future. This was followed by the peaceful **succession of the third King George** in 1760 – young, attractive, Protestant and British born – which indicated that Jacobitism was waning as a political force in the British Isles. This decline was complete on the **death of James Francis Edward** in 1766, when the pope and then France refused to pronounce his heir, **Charles Edward Stuart**, King Charles III.

When Charles died in 1788, followed by his daughter Charlotte, his brother Henry became the Jacobite king Henry IX. But Henry did not press his claim, eventually receiving an annuity from George III. With his death in 1807, the legitimate senior Stuart line died too.

Peter Lely's portrait of the future **James II and VII**, whose ejection from the British Isles after 1688 seeded the Jacobite cause





### Aura of invincibility

A 19th-century painting shows Jacobite troops entering the Cheshire town of Altrincham on 1 December 1745. Charles was an inspiring leader – but only while his army was on a winning streak

events of 1745 to 1746. De Broses made a very important observation regarding Charles's life in Rome: the prince "feels deeply the oppressive character of his present position, and, should he not one day be relieved from that oppression, a want of enterprise will certainly not be the cause". When, in early 1744, a French invasion in support of the Stuarts and headed by Charles failed, the prince, in pursuit of his destiny, spent the next year secretly organising a small military landing on the west coast of Scotland.

### Marching into England

Although no one seems to have believed him, Charles had given some prominent Jacobites due warning, during a meeting the year before with John Murray of Broughton (his principal secretary during the campaign), that he would be "coming home" in the summer of 1745. Just prior to leaving France for the Western Isles, Charles wrote to Broughton: "I am now resolved to be as good as my word and to execute a resolution, which has never been a moment out of my thoughts, since I first took it in your presence." Soon after, in a letter to his father who knew nothing of it, he reveals finally his plan to head up a rising "and so Conquer or Dye".

Initially at least, the Stuart prince did not disappoint on his arrival in Scotland. Charles had to overcome significant resistance, even from traditionally pro-Stuart clan chiefs,

## Charles's officers urged a retreat to Scotland. But he was for an advance on London – come hell or high water

which he did through perseverance, charm and using the ineffable power of royalty to appeal to the hearts, rather than the heads, of these loyal but understandably apprehensive Highlanders. The army crossed from Glenfinnan to Edinburgh, and then swatted away the British Army at the battle of Prestonpans on 21 September. It then marched through northern England, via Carlisle and Manchester, and arrived at Derby on 4 December 1745. The ease with which it achieved all this seemed to confirm that God and the British people were on Charles's side.

All remained well while the Jacobite army was on a winning streak. Charles was the image of an inspiring leader, rising early, chairing his war council, drilling his men

and marching proudly alongside them. But challenges lay ahead. Unbeknown to the prince, his predominantly Scottish officers had already decided that the market town of Derby was the line in the sand: if the English Jacobites rose (at last) and the long-promised French invasion materialised, then they would march on to London. If this did not happen, then, with three armies now converging on them, a swift retreat back to Scotland, to consolidate their strong position there, was the only logical path. Charles was for London – come hell or high water.

In view of the forces mobilising against him, this attitude gives the lie to accusations that Charles was a coward. But it was not a little reckless. Politically, the prince's instinct makes sense. Despite its size, the Jacobite army had succeeded, beyond the most optimistic supporter's wildest dreams, achieving the reputation for invincibility in the process – a situation that could carry it all the way to London. What 6,000 men and boys would have done on arrival in the metropolis is another matter altogether.

In the event, Charles's commanders won the argument. The prince took the retreat from Derby personally, as a profound blow to his authority and the Stuart cause itself. From then on, his behaviour is described as transformed from inspirational and vigorous, to sulky and obstructive. Until, that is, he reached Culloden (the battle that has proven such a source of contention as to his character

and leadership). This last throw of the dice seems to have energised him once more.

Arguably the most famous episode of Charles's entire life occurred after his flight from Culloden. Unable to find a French ship, the prince spent five months as a fugitive in the Western Highlands, which included his celebrated escape to Skye in a boat with Flora MacDonald. During these desperate months, moving from isle to isle and hut to hiding hole, the prince, with a £30,000 bounty on his head, was assisted by locals who – whether for or against the Stuarts – did not want the ignominy of the prince's capture or death to occur while among them. Many, like Flora, assisted him in respect for their clan chiefs and, on a very human level, because they had sympathy for a vulnerable, hunted man.

It is here where the legend of 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', the lad born to be king and who will come again, began to take shape. This image was assisted by the obvious parallels between Charles's current travails and that of his great-uncle and namesake Charles II – even down to the way in which both men evaded capture. The elder Charles famously hid in the Boscobel Oak after the royalist defeat at the battle of Worcester (1651), while the younger one concealed himself in a habitation called 'Cluny's Cage', formed from a hawthorn bush on Ben Alder.

### Hitched up skirts

At first, Charles complained bitterly of his discomfit, at one time wrapped in a plaid and groaning pathetically as he was attacked by midges, or moaning, as he recalled, about a diet of "mostly nothing else but Milck", which caused "a moste violent Bludy flux", only alleviated by large doses of brandy. And his escape with Flora MacDonald, dressed as her Irish maid 'Betty Burke', encouraged gleeful reporting in London of the prince's effeminate, even transgressive nature. Charles later described "Betty" as "the character C-s [Charles] was to assume", as if he were at a masked ball, and playfully hitched up his skirts – to the horror of those who were risking their lives to conceal him. In this sense, the prince conformed to Horace Walpole's sneering comment: "We know nothing certainly of the young pretender, but that he is concealed in Scotland, and devoured with distempers: I really wonder how an Italian constitution can have supported such rigours!"

However, after several months on the run, Charles, the seasoned huntsman, began to ease into his current



### Spent force

A portrait of an ageing Charles Stuart. As his life descended into alcoholism and violence, support for him and his cause ebbed away

circumstances. One observer, John Cameron, who met the prince late August 1746, over four months after Culloden, described him as "bare-footed, had an old black kilt on, a plaid, philapeg and waistcoat, a dirty shirt and", most startling of all, "a long red beard, a gun in his hand, a pistol and durk by his side. He was very cheerful and in good health." Cameron conjured an image of a man at home in the rugged glory of the Highlands, about as far away from his pampered existence in Rome as it is possible to get. Even so, as the company sat down to eat, straight from the stewing-pot bubbling on the fire, the prince pulled out a silver spoon, rescued from his baggage after the battle, with which, without ceremony, he served himself.

A few weeks later, he and his protectors received news that a French ship had arrived at Borrodale. Before boarding, Charles turned to his companions and declared "my lads be in good spirits, it shall not be long before I shall be with you, and shall endeavour to make up for all the loss you have endured". No doubt, Charles meant it. For, on arriving in France, he set about agitating for the men, money and

arms needed to continue the fight.

But, even as the ship steered out on to the open sea – and before we get too carried away with the romance of it – one of his companions, John Macdonald, observed that the prince had most certainly left the Highlanders "in a worse state than he found us".

As it turned out, the rebellion of 1745 was Charles's finest hour, and the remaining four decades of his life can be summarised as a decline into despair, alcoholism and violence, particularly against his closest supporters, his mistresses and latterly his wife and daughter. The erratic behaviour and drunkenness meant that support for him drained away.

By the time his father died in 1766, even the pope and the French refused to acknowledge him as King Charles III. Without their support, the Jacobite cause was effectively dead. The prince resided at the Palazzo del Re, his birthplace, until his death in 1788. But back in the Highlands, like a ghostly Dorian Gray in reverse, the perpetual youth, Bonnie Prince Charlie, lingered on. **H**

**Jacqueline Riding** is a historian and author whose books include *Jacobites: A New History of the '45 Rebellion* (Bloomsbury, 2016)

### LISTEN

To listen to Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss the Jacobite rebellion on BBC Radio 4's *In Our Time*, go to [bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p00548y0](http://bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p00548y0)



Flora MacDonald probably helped the prince escape to Skye out of loyalty to her clan chief

# “The power of the Irish over the Britons is great”

For centuries, Ireland lived in the shadow of its nearest neighbour, but that wasn't always the case. **Fergal Keane** takes us back to the early medieval era, when Britain's culture and religious beliefs were profoundly shaped by visitors from across the Irish Sea



GETTY IMAGES



Accompanies the  
three-part BBC Radio 4  
series **How the Irish  
Shaped Britain**

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4

### **Beacon of light**

A 12th-century Celtic round tower  
at Clonmacnoise, County Offaly.  
Though Ireland had been menaced  
by Viking raids, it was, in the words  
of Samuel Johnson, "the school of  
the west, the quiet habitation of  
sanctity and literature"

“**W**hat is there more marvellous,” an eighth-century Gaelic poem asks, “than the incomparable great story?”

The great story of the Irish in Britain is frequently told as a triumph over racism and exclusion – from the era of signs declaring “No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish” to 21st-century success in business, the arts and entertainment.

The Irish built the roads, canals and housing estates. They cleared away the debris of Luftwaffe bombing raids. In the words of the ballad ‘McAlpine’s Fusiliers’, they “sweated blood and they washed down mud with pints and quarts of beer”. It is a story of hardship and forbearance whose privations are hard to imagine for the modern Irish in Britain.

But the legend of the Fusiliers – the men who built Britain – and of the ‘Ryanair Generation’ of educated young people that followed them, has obscured an extraordinary story. To know it we must travel far back, before the great divisions of modern history.

I was born in London to Irish parents but returned with them to live in Ireland. The ‘old struggle’ between the nations defined the politics of the world in which I grew up. As a journalist and writer of history I have been preoccupied with examining the roots of conflict between the British and Irish. It has been the dominating story of my life, to which I return again and again.

But now that the ‘Troubles’ have been consigned to memory it is possible to look at the past, however distant, and see it in all its richness and nuance. We are surely past the point where Anglo-Irish relations can be weaponised by warring traditions.

### A flurry of axes

Like most of my schoolmates in the 1970s, I believed that the Romans had rowed down the coast of Ireland during a particularly bad winter, taken a considered look at the rugged shores and unfriendly locals and decided conquest wasn’t worth the trouble.

I also believed that the same Romans kept the British tribes too busy to cause trouble for the Irish, leaving us to get on with our natural vocation of being saintly and scholarly. According to the accepted version, all was well until the Vikings descended in a flurry of axes and pillage in AD 798, to be followed by the Normans in 1169 and the subsequent rollout of 750 years of English domination.

But by reaching into antiquity, we can discover the story of how Irish warriors, traders and monks helped to change the face



**Two-way traffic** This 16th-century map of Britain and Ireland – based on Ptolemy’s second-century AD *Geographia* – suggests that the Irish Sea acted more as a bridge than a barrier between early Celtic tribes

## In the spiritual and cultural spheres, it is difficult to exaggerate the influence of the Irish in Britain

of Britain. In the words of that same Gaelic poem, the Irish went “eastward towards the Sun Tree, into the broad long-distant sea, across the land of Saxons of mighty shields”.

Far from being a barrier, the sea has linked peoples and cultures in eastern Ireland to communities along the west coast of Britain for more than two millennia. We traded and inter-married and shared a common language with the west of Scotland and the Isle of Man, as well as a Druidic culture with the rest of Britain.

Dr Clare Downham teaches the early medieval period at the University of Liverpool and has researched Irish influences on western Britain. “I think often there’s a stereotype in modern times that somehow people in the past were more segregated into distinct groups and cultures than they are now,” she says. “But the fact is, travel by sea has always been a feature of human existence and was often easier and faster in the Middle Ages than it would be to travel by land.”

It was nothing like the “sea of death where hell begins” evoked by Homer, nor was it home to what the Greek geographer Strabo

called “a cannibal race who deem it commendable to devour their deceased fathers”. In fact, it was another, less hyperbolic, Greek who produced the first map showing the proximity of Ireland to her larger neighbour. The *Geographia* of Claudius Ptolemy from around AD 150 also reveals that the Brigantes – an early Celtic tribe – settled on both sides of the Irish sea.

For the administrators of Roman Britain, trade with Ireland was a mainstay of the west coast economy. Irish cattle barons despatched herds to feed and clothe the legions. In the first century AD, Tacitus wrote of Ireland that the “interior parts are little known, but through commercial intercourse and the merchants there is better knowledge of the harbours and approaches”.

I remember my sense of wonder when I attended an archaeological dig some years ago at Silchester about an hour’s drive from London, and was shown an Ogham stone, a standing stone inscribed with ancient Gaelic.

The Ogham alphabet has 20 letters and is one of the few alphabets written and read vertically. It was a sight more familiar to me from the fields near my ancestral village of Ardmore in County Waterford. The Silchester stone celebrated an Irish trader with the Latin name, Tebicatus, who settled in Britain during the last years of the Roman imperium. Similar stones are found in Wales, Scotland and on the Devon/Cornwall border.

Professor Dáibhí Ó Cróinín of National University of Ireland Galway explains that, from as early as AD 200, there was substantial emigration from the south-east of Ireland to south-west Britain. “These were not just passing Irish people, they were not just raiders who were having a boozy weekend and then going back to Ireland. On the

## Darkness and light

A painting of the battle of Clontarf fought between Irish and Viking armies in 1014. As a schoolboy, Fergal Keane believed that the Irish were a scholarly, saintly people before Norse raiders brought chaos and violence



## Island hopping

An Ogham stone in County Tyrone. Such monoliths, inscribed with ancient Gaelic, have been discovered on both sides of the Irish Sea

contrary, they were obviously settled and they were a population group that became an independent, separate Irish kingdom for want of a better word.”

Of course there *were* Irish raiders. To fight them off, the Romans resorted to tactics tested when fighting the German tribes. They brought in Irish settlers, armed them and in return for grants of land gave them the task of protecting the borders from their marauding fellow countrymen.

“That’s why they’re there,” says Professor Ó Cróinín. “That’s why they erect these stones as a sign that they are settled and that they have ownership of the property... The Romans wanted these guys to protect them. They didn’t want to expend good Roman soldiers doing this kind of grunt work.”

## Romans out, Irish in

As the Romans withdrew from Britain, Irish raiding and colonising increased. Cormac of Cashel, a ninth and tenth-century AD king of Munster, wrote that the “power of the Irish over the Britons was great, and they had divided Britain between them into estates... and the Irish lived as much east of the sea as they did in Ireland”. Cormac was given to overstatement. The Irish in this period were one of a number of groups taking advantage of the decline of order that accompanied the Roman exodus.

It is in the spiritual and cultural spheres that it is difficult to exaggerate the influence of the Irish. In the words of the great

18th-century lexicographer Samuel Johnson, the period that followed the collapse of Roman power was when “Ireland was the school of the west, the quiet habitation of sanctity and literature”.

It was Irish monks who spread the Christian gospel in Scotland. The most famous was Saint Columba, who established his monastery on the island of Iona in the Inner Hebrides in the sixth century and is credited with converting the Picts to Christianity. A lament written after his death described Columba as:

“The leader of nations who guarded the living...  
our chief of the needy...  
our messenger of the Lord...  
the whole world it was his.”

Columba’s monks proselytised in the Scottish part of Dál Riata. This ancient kingdom spanned both sides of the channel separating northern Ireland and western Scotland. With the Christian faith came a reverence for learning and writing as exemplified by the magnificent Lindisfarne Gospels which blend Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Italian styles.

When Oswald, king of Northumbria, wanted to revive the Christian faith in the face of growing paganism, he sent to Iona, in the heart of Dál Riata, where he had studied as a young man, for a suitable missionary. The monk who arrived, Saint Aidan, is described by the early church historian, the Venerable Bede as “a man of outstanding gentleness, holiness and moderation”.

## The Irish influence on Britain



### Grim stereotypes

An Irish leader bathes in a broth of boiled horse flesh in a kingship ritual, as described by Gerald of Wales in c1220. In the eyes of many Norman chroniclers, Irish culture was defined by barbarity

Aidan went on to found the monastery at Lindisfarne on Holy Island and successfully turned the tide of paganism among the Anglo-Saxons. Writing in the eighth century, Bede describes how “many Irishmen arrived day by day in Britain and proclaimed the word of God with great devotion...”

But not all the incoming clerics were candidates for sainthood. Of one of them it was written:

“Cú Chuimhne in his youth  
Read his way through half the truth  
He let the other half lie  
While he gave women a try.”

As late as the ninth century there are records of Irish clerics arriving in Wessex – the kingdom that dominated much of southern England – and making their way to the court of Alfred the Great in full expectation of spiritual employment and bodily sustenance.

“When you look at any English artistic production from the early Middle Ages, the influence of the Irish is immediately apparent... so much came from Ireland in the Middle Ages,” says Clare Downham.

### Norman conquerors

So what happened to change the relatively benign view of the Irish in Britain? Start with the Normans. The Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the 12th century created a relationship of conqueror and conquered which would be justified in the language of colonial denigration.

The influential writer, Gerald of Wales, scion of a prominent Norman family, described the Irish as cut off from the civilised world and being “not only barbarous in their dress but suffering their hair and beards to grow enormously in an uncouth manner... indeed all their habits are barbarisms... these people inhabit a country so remote from the rest of the world and lying at its furthest extremity... and are thus excluded from civilised nations, they learn nothing and



### Happier times

Irish prime minister Bertie Ahern (left), his British counterpart Tony Blair (right) and US Senator George Mitchell pictured on 10 April 1998 after signing the Good Friday Agreement, a high-water mark for modern Anglo-Irish relations

practise nothing, but the barbarism in which they are born and bred and which sticks to them like a second nature.”

In the long centuries that followed, Ireland would emerge as an existential threat to Britain, becoming the rebellious other island which remained Catholic after Henry VIII's English Reformation. The faith once spread by Irish monks became a mark of division. Protestant England feared invasion by Catholic forces launched from Ireland. Rebellion, plantation and more rebellion followed. The shared ancient past was buried in the accumulated bitterness of centuries.

Why does any of this matter now? For one thing, we are experiencing a resurgence of mistrust between the two islands, driven by the debate around Brexit. The Republic of Ireland fears the return of a hard border with Northern Ireland. The UK government stresses the importance of British sovereignty. The warmth in the bilateral relationship so evident after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 has distinctly cooled. Fears have been expressed of a return to violence if barriers are erected between north and south. In such febrile times it can be too easy to forget what is shared.

Our history certainly had its share of wretchedness but by returning to the age before conquest we can see what was possible when the talents and energy of the two islands fused, as the sixth-century lament for Saint Columba recalls:

“The northern land shone  
The western people blazed...  
He ran the course which runs past  
hatred to right action.” **H**

**By returning to the age before conquest we can see what was possible when the talents and energy of the two islands fused**

Fergal Keane is a senior on-air editor with BBC News and an author. His three-part series *How the Irish Shaped Britain* begins on 11 January on Radio 4

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# BOOKS

## ANCIENT WORLD

“Thebes was extraordinary in its own right but effortlessly overshadowed by its neighbours”

Catherine Nixey on Paul Cartledge's *Thebes* ▶ page 85



## JAPAN

# // Harding offers up an enjoyable romp across the Japanese archipelago //



Andrew Cobbing reviews Christopher Harding's *The Japanese: A History in Twenty Lives* ▶ page 80

## INTERVIEW

“The British have long been perceived as different and unpredictable”

Robert Tombs discusses his new book, *This Sovereign Isle: Britain In and Out of Europe* ▶ page 76

## SECOND WORLD WAR

“To have appeared on the Nazis' hitlist – known as the ‘Black Book’ – was a badge of honour”

Robert Hutton gives his verdict on Sybil Oldfield's *The Black Book* ▶ page 84

## BLACK HISTORY

“This is what every historical work should be: a call for commitment to positive change”

A.S Francis reviews Olivette Otele's *African Europeans* ▶ page 83

## INTERVIEW / ROBERT TOMBS

# “Both sides of the Brexit debate have got things wrong about our history”

**ROBERT TOMBS** speaks to Ellie Cawthorne about his book *This Sovereign Isle*, which examines the complex history of Britain's relationship with Europe to unpick the long, tangled roots of Brexit

**Ellie Cawthorne:** Your new book looks at Brexit, but from the perspective of a longer history of the relationship between Britain and Europe. What made you want to write this book?

**Robert Tombs:** Our ideas about Europe, our relationship with Europe and the difficulties of that relationship – the whole European project, in fact – are all essentially based on an understanding of the past (and hence of the present), and expectations about the future. You could write endless books about Brexit and the EU, analysing political structures, economic systems and so on. But I think there's a whole dimension of the decision that can only be understood as a reflection on the past, so therefore we have to take a historical approach.

**One of the central tenets of your book is that if you look at the past, then Brexit becomes 'historically explicable'. How so?**

Our past has meant that our relationship with Europe is very fluid. We could obviously have chosen to remain in the EU and we almost did, but the outcome of the 2016 referendum shouldn't be a surprise either. I believe that Brexit is historically explicable, but not historically determined. It's very common to believe that there is a pre-set direction that history is moving in. We tend to be prone to that kind of thinking – for example that history dictates we are a European country, or that history dictates that we are not a European country. That seems damaging to me, because I think we have to be clear that we make our own decisions about the politics of today. History helps us to understand where we are, but it doesn't tell us where we have to go from here.

**When Brexit dominated the news agenda, politicians and the media on both sides of the debate made all kinds of historical parallels, from the Reformation to Britain 'standing alone' in the Second World War. Why do you think that people are so desperate to enlist history onto their side in debates such as this?**

When politicians or commentators look for historical analogies or examples, it's almost always for rhetorical purposes. It's very rarely analytical – almost never. Whether you're professionally involved in the study of history or only occasionally think about the past, we all like to think that there is some sort of meaning in what we do. We don't like to believe that events are entirely arbitrary or a matter of chance. We crave some sense of direction and certainty. That's why we hang

on to certain great stories from history – to give us a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning. Historians are often pretty annoying and boring people because we're always poking holes in these stories – pointing out the exceptions and stating that the details are not quite as you think. That's a good thing, but it can sometimes leave people feeling disoriented, confused or disillusioned.

**What do you think people have got wrong about the history of Britain's relationship with Europe?**

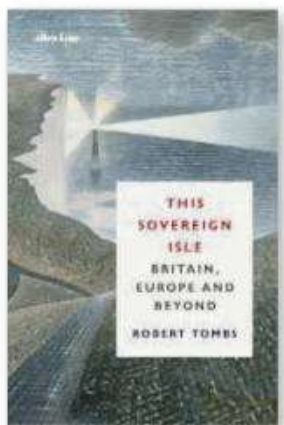
This probably sounds terribly arrogant, but I think that both sides of the Brexit debate have got it wrong. I'm simplifying things a bit, but essentially, the pro-EU view argues that the unification of Europe is inevitable. It's part of the unstoppable tide of history. We've been left out before, and being left out again would be a terrible mistake. We've heard over and over again that we have to be part of Europe because otherwise we'll be marginalised, isolated and all that. But I think that's wrong. Because the future of Europe, like its past, is unpredictable. There's no reason to think that the EU is simply going to continue as it has done previously. It may break up, or hit all sorts of crises. So the idea that we're going to be browbeaten into accepting a certain political relationship because people tell us that's “just how things are” seems wrong to me.

On the other side are those in the Leave camp who say: “Britain has always been separate. We stood alone. Our political system and legal system are so different that we could never be part of the EU.” These arguments also seem to me to be an oversimplification. The obvious fact is that we were in the EU for nearly 50 years, and we almost remained in it in 2016. Had we voted the other way, which we could easily have done, then that might have been our future decided for the foreseeable. We would be members of the EU indefinitely and that would have set us on a quite different path from the one we chose.

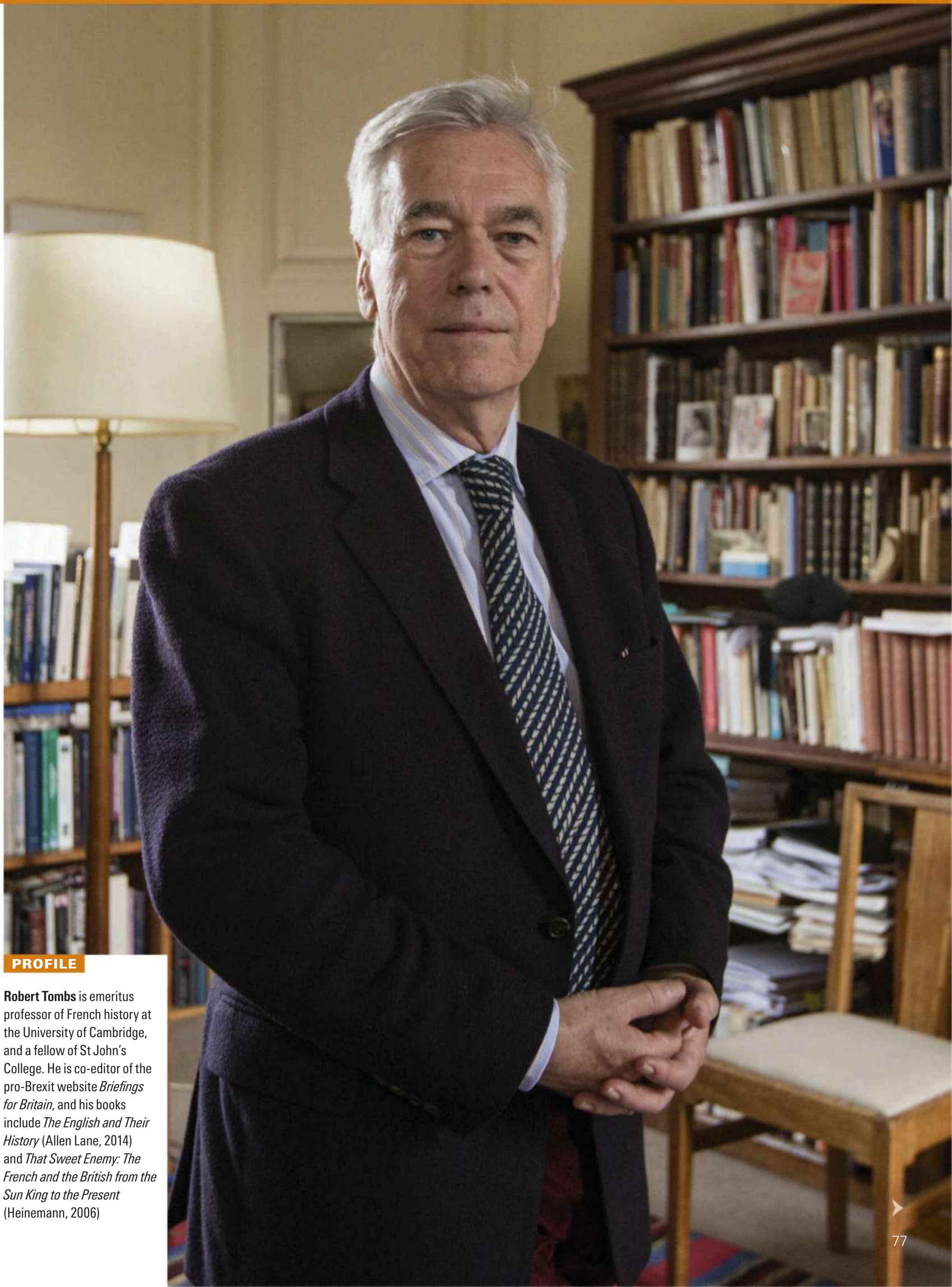
People who say that only one side of the Brexit debate was legitimate seem wrong to me. Both options were rational and had good arguments behind them, but in neither case did they dictate the only sensible thing to do.

**What have the defining trends in Britain's relationship with Europe been over time?**

For most of our history we've had quite loose and changing relationships with parts of Europe – we've gone through a succession of close connections, rather than just a single one. I think you can identify six periods in which we've had close relationships with the continent. One with the Roman empire; a fairly short one with Scandinavia; one with France lasting 400 years or so; one with Holland after the Glorious Revolution of 1688; and one with Germany after the Hanoverian



**This Sovereign Isle**  
by Robert Tombs  
(Allen Lane, 160 pages,  
£16.99, published 28 Jan)

**PROFILE**

**Robert Tombs** is emeritus professor of French history at the University of Cambridge, and a fellow of St John's College. He is co-editor of the pro-Brexit website *Briefings for Britain*, and his books include *The English and Their History* (Allen Lane, 2014) and *That Sweet Enemy: The French and the British from the Sun King to the Present* (Heinemann, 2006)

succession. And then, of course, our more recent relationship with the EU.

It's quite difficult to say which part of Europe we have had the closest affinity with. Are we really a bit of offshore Scandinavia? Are we very much like France? Are we in fact a Germanic culture at heart? What is clear is that since the 16th century, it's been very exceptional for us to consider a permanent organic tie with Europe as a whole.

#### **What has the rest of Europe thought of Britain over time?**

You're asking me for a heroic generalisation here. But generally, I think the tendency has been for continental Europe to see Britain as a strange, odd place. Novelties often hail from Britain, and ideas about our eccentricity are a big European cliché.

Of course, opinions of us have changed over time. During the Middle Ages, Britain was seen as a pretty wild and woolly, if rich, country on the edge of civilisation. There was even a belief that the English had tails. In the early modern period, it was the defender of Protestantism. In the 20th century, for many Europeans, it was one of the defenders of freedom against totalitarianism.

But Britain has also sometimes been seen as an enemy. I think many people in France, even those who quite like British visitors, nevertheless think of us as a sort of hereditary foe. Recently there was an interesting opinion poll that asked people of various nationalities which countries they would be willing to help financially in a crisis. While the British replied that they would help out almost everybody in Europe, the majority of other Europeans surveyed said they would not be willing to help Britain. So I think that the way Brexit has been reported has certainly had an impact on the way that Europeans think of us. I think that's a sense of betrayal for a minority, but on the whole, a feeling of not understanding us. However, it's often been the case that the British have been perceived as different and unpredictable.

#### **Of course, the story of Britain and Europe can't be viewed in isolation, as it's inevitably intertwined with events much further afield. Where does the story of empire fit into this?**

It's important to say that Britain was far from the only European country with an empire. But I think the British empire has left a legacy which is somewhat more important for us than is the case with other European nations and their former colonies.

If there's one thing we all know, it's that our survival in two world wars was largely owing to overseas alliances – the empire, the Commonwealth and the United States – in a way that is not true of any other European country. Those alliances still exist to some extent. And hence at various levels – economic, military, defensive and cultural – our links outside of Europe are more important than those of any other European state.

One consequence of that is that Britain, although a member of the EEC and then the EU for nearly 50 years, has never been as integrated economically as the other member countries. We were the only large EU member state that was not part of the Eurozone. Had we joined the Eurozone, which we nearly did, then I believe we would not have

**// The idea that Britain always 'stood apart' isn't really true. In the immediate postwar period, British governments were actually very keen on European integration //**



Anti-Brexit protesters demonstrate outside the Houses of Parliament on 30 January 2020. "Both options in the Brexit debate were rational and had good arguments behind them," argues Robert Tombs

voted to leave in 2016, because the dangers would have been much greater. And hence, whatever you say about our long-term history, geographical factors or the empire, had we been in the eurozone, I think we would still be members of the EU.

#### **How has the changing relationship with Europe over history shaped relationships between nations within the British Isles?**

It still does, as we are seeing with Scotland at the moment. It's very clear that the whole Brexit issue has given a great boost to Scottish desires for independence.

One constant through history has been that, for Scotland, Ireland and sometimes Wales, relations with continental states were a way of resisting or opposing the power of England. The Auld Alliance between Scotland and France is the most famous example of that. At the same time, continental enemies of England were eager to use the other nations in the British Isles as allies – the French and the Scots; the French and the Irish during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars; the Germans and the Irish during the First World War. That's always been a complicating factor in the relationships within Britain. On the other hand, if we had a common European enemy, whether it was France or, later, Germany, then that tended to make ties between the nations in the British Isles closer. So depending on the circumstances, they could either bring us together or split us apart.

#### **How did the Second World War reshape ideas about Europe and Britain's role within it?**

I think that Britain's very different experience of the 20th century – and of the Second World War in particular – means that we had different attitudes towards the European Union as a project. One way of seeing the EU is as a way of preventing another war or stopping Europe from falling into dictatorship. But I don't think that Britons see that so vividly as the French or Germans, because the 20th century was simply less traumatic for us. For us, the Second World War is a rather exciting story, a costume drama and a bit of a myth, but if you're German or French or Polish, it's a lot more serious than that. You only have to look at literature and cinema to see that continental countries have been asking very serious questions about it in a way that we haven't in recent years.

The widely held idea that we always 'stood apart' isn't really true. In the immediate postwar period, British governments were actually very keen on European integration because they were afraid, as most people were, of a Russian takeover, a German revival or that Europe would simply collapse into chaos. It was the British who took the lead in creating the Council of Europe, the Western European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights. All these things were



A bust of Britain's Queen Anne (centre top) is surrounded by European allies in an image marking victory over France at the 1704 battle of Schellenberg. "We've had quite loose and changing relationships with parts of Europe for most of our history," says Robert Tombs

largely British initiatives. Therefore, people have asked: "What went wrong?" I think the difference was that British governments, both Labour and Conservative, were very reluctant to give up sovereignty or to give up political control in a way that some European countries were more willing to do, partly because they'd suffered so much or they were already so weakened that it didn't seem to them a great loss.

### How do you think future historians might reflect on how Brexit, and the debate around it, unfolded?

I hope that in a generation people will have largely forgotten it and wonder why we made so much fuss about it. We tend to remember big disasters from our history, such as wars. But there are lots of important events, which at the time seemed absolutely epoch-making, that most people have now completely forgotten. Take, for instance, the separation of Ireland from the UK. From the 1880s to the 1920s, this was practically the dominating theme of British politics. And yet I wonder how many people now even realise that Ireland was once part of the UK or know when it became independent or what the circumstances were. Now it seems the most natural thing in the world. Another example would be the Corn Law debates in the 1840s, which remade our politics. How many people know anything about that? So I rather hope that in 20 years' time, people will think: "Oh yes, once we were part of the EU and then we decided not to be. What was all the fuss about?"

When you look back from a distance, you tend to overlook the details and just see the big picture. So while I think a lot of the political debate will probably be forgotten in 30 years, I think that future generations will see Brexit as part of an international trend, which is critical of, or at least increasingly hesitant about, institutions like the EU that embody globalisation and neoliberalism. They will probably

see it, as many people do already, as showing a conflict between a new international middle class, which has done very well out of globalisation, and a majority of less successful people who cling to the idea of the nation state as the thing to protect them and defend their interests.

What will decide who was right in the long run? I think it will come down to whether this gamble on a democratic nation state was a wise one, because I think that's what Brexit really was. In some senses our generation will be judged on things that are entirely beyond our control. We don't know how the world will develop. We don't know whether the EU will still be around in 20 years or what form it will be in. We're all having to make guesses to some extent, based on our understanding of the past.

### Having looked back at this long history, how would you like to change the discussion around Brexit?

What I would ideally like is that, however people voted, they could see that the result was reasonable. That it was not a completely crazy decision, and in fact, British attitudes to the EU are very little different from those in Europe as a whole. The differences are of circumstance, not of culture or attitude. Therefore we're not seeing some crazy explosion of racist populism, unless we're seeing that all over Europe, which I don't think we really are. Perhaps the people who voted to leave will think: "OK, there were valid reasons, maybe I was right." And people who voted remain would, I hope, say: "OK, maybe it wasn't such a crazy decision as I thought, things might not be so bad." And maybe there's a way in which we can find things that we agree about. **H**

### MORE FROM US

Listen to an extended version of this interview with Robert Tombs on our podcast soon at [historyextra.com/podcast](http://historyextra.com/podcast)



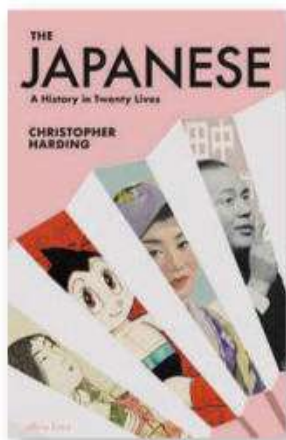
### Gilded visions of the past

Scenes from Murasaki Shikibu's 11th-century literary masterpiece *The Tale of Genji*, as depicted by a later artist. Murasaki is one of 20 figures whose life stories form the basis of a book by Christopher Harding

## ASIA

# Portraits of a nation

**ANDREW COBBING** enjoys a vivid journey through Japanese history, distilled into the stories of 20 individuals whose lives shed valuable light on the making of the nation's identity



**The Japanese:  
A History in  
Twenty Lives**  
by Christopher Harding  
Allen Lane, 528 pages, £25

This is an enjoyable romp through the ages across the Japanese archipelago. It's a tall order to

cover the rich tapestry of Japan's history in one volume, and for the most part Christopher Harding pulls it off, exploring aspects of Japanese identity through 20 life stories. It's an interesting premise, with a

carefully chosen range of personalities: from playwrights, chemists and doctors to a shaman queen, a warlord and members of the imperial family.

It's impossible to cover everyone, of course, so there are conspicuous absentees as well, among them scholar Sugawara no Michizane and prominent thinker Fukuzawa Yukichi. Such luminaries are generally incorporated, however, in the sweeping narratives that provide context for each portrait. These transitions also help connect the dramatis personae across the centuries that separate their scattered lives. It's a device that requires some chronological juggling, and occasionally this background threatens to outweigh the personal stories. Some lucid

prose and judicious summary, though, predominantly keep each individual centre stage, their experiences offering personal insight on the society they knew.

Harding begins by exploring the story of shaman priestess and queen Himiko – Japan's first named historical figure in an age before writing spread to the islands. The inhabitants of this time are seen through the recorded impressions of early Chinese visitors, hinting at customs that persisted for centuries to come.

Mystery also surrounds the figure Prince Shōtoku, though his role in the emergence of statehood shines through in announcing Japan as the 'land of the rising sun'. The lives of Emperor Kanmu, who founded Kyoto, and Murasaki Shikibu, a courtier who wrote the

11th-century manuscript *The Tale of Genji*, are then accompanied by some vivid detail on Heian period culture – its ceremonial calendar, poetic trysts, superstitions and the bustle en route to the annual Kamo Festival.

Next, we see the onset of warrior rule in medieval Japan through the eyes of a nun, Hōjō Masako, who controlled the realm's most powerful family. Harding is in his element here, describing how the monk Shinran was inspired by a Damascene moment to spread Buddhism beyond hallowed temple walls and offer fresh hope to the masses. Now they were promised relief from this world of suffering through a leap of faith to a 'pure land' in the next. It's a stretch, though, to then shunt the Mongol invasions into the next chapter as just part of the backstory for a playwright, but nevertheless, the career of said playwright, Zeami, does shed some interesting light on the formative role of Nō theatre in Japan's dramatic tradition. Similarly, that of warlord Oda Nobunaga shows how uniting the realm meant crushing the power of the monasteries and their hordes of warrior monks.

At the turn of the 17th century, samurai Hasekura Tsunenaga's voyages to Mexico, Rome and back are a reminder of just how engaged the Japanese were in an early wave of globalisation. During the peaceful dominion of Pax Tokugawa in Japan, meanwhile, Ihara Saikaku exposed the human conceit he saw around him in his sardonically witty novels, which sparked the 'floating world' genre of fiction, describing the new urban pleasures of the era. As Harding points out, social climbing during this period involved merchants rubbing shoulders with samurai, just as the samurai had waded into court society centuries before.

Moving swiftly on to the 19th century, the swashbuckling adventures of Sakamoto Ryōma frame the precipitate fall of the Tokugawa shogunate. Such is the headlong rush at this point, though, that the Royal Navy bombarding Kagoshima somehow escapes notice altogether. In the same generation, we meet Kusumoto Ine, Japan's first female doctor. The instructional manuals she read as a child illustrate contemporary mores on the role of women.

The new Meiji regime was soon endeavouring, as Harding neatly puts it, to "secure Japan's position in a very rough global neighbourhood". We meet the energetic railway entrepreneur, Shibusawa Eiichi, and Tsuda Umeko, who, schooled in America, experienced reverse culture shock on her return to Japan. The conservative strictures later imposed on imperial subjects constrained her pioneering efforts in women's education.

Shortly after the onset of the 20th century,

Ikeda Kikunae, one of a new generation of scientists, drew on a traditional dish to formally identify the fifth basic taste of *umami* (alongside bitter, salty, sour and sweet). Artists, meanwhile, were increasingly ambivalent about Japan's recent 'progress', with Tanizaki Jun'ichirō lamenting the glare of modernity in his essay *In Praise of Shadows*. And Yosano Akiko, now a celebrated poet, expressed fears for China on a tour of Manchuria, recalling the nostalgia western observers once felt about traditions being swept away in Meiji Japan.

## // Social climbing now involved merchants rubbing shoulders with samurai, just as the samurai had waded into court society centuries before //

Postwar lives then trace the creative energy that has since found expression in the global success of Japanese popular culture, through J-Pop, manga and anime. Child star Hibari Misora became the voice of timeless *enka* ballads that launched a thousand karaoke bars, while Tezuka Osamu's Atom was the first in a new wave of animation stars now instantly recognisable worldwide. Tanaka Kakuei's term as prime minister, by contrast, highlights the 'iron triangle' of power between politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. And the highly publicised psychological struggles of Owada Masako, now empress, reflect the turmoil of today's internet generation.

Overall, religion and culture feature most prominently here. There is also much to learn on imperial Kyoto as well as the old province of Echigo, which appears sporadically as a sort of otherworld to the metropole: a place of exile that inspired the remote landscapes portrayed by Nobel prize-winning author Kawabata Yasunari in *Snow Country*.

A tour de force in some respects, this imaginative book may well be the "ideal introduction" for anyone new to Japan that the blurb declares, though they might need plenty of time as it's a hefty tome. Vividly written, there are certainly some interesting surprises to savour along the way. **H**

.....  
**Andrew Cobbing** is associate professor at the University of Nottingham

## AUTHORS ON THE PODCAST

### Sujit Sivasundaram on how the British empire spread across the oceans

"Traditionally the history of the British empire is written as a galloping story, with the empire expanding across the globe from the nerve centre of London.



But this metropolitan view has marginalised stories from the islands of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. We've always imagined empires as primarily land-based, but we need to think much more fundamentally about the role of oceans."

### Natalie Haynes on the varied representations of women in Greek myths

"We only ever think of Helen as 'Helen of Troy', but in another version of the story at least as old as Homer, she goes to Egypt, not to Troy, and doesn't elope with Paris at all. It's strange that these versions of the stories have just been lost or aren't talked about, while others live on. People ask me about the 'real version' of the myths, and truth is, there isn't one. They're all retellings, even the ones that we think of as authoritative."



### Giles Tremlett on the International Brigades

"The International Brigades saw the Spanish Civil War as a fight against global fascism. But they were also trying to win an argument, which was that fascism would have to be fought with weapons not just words. And the Second World War proved that they were right in that argument because suddenly everyone was an anti-fascist."



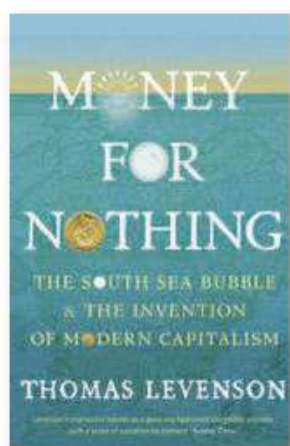
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## ECONOMICS

# Risky business

**MARTIN DAUNTON** recommends a new narrative account of the South Sea Bubble – the 18th-century financial scandal that managed to embroil some of Britain’s finest minds



**Money for Nothing:  
The South Sea  
Bubble and the  
Invention of  
Modern Capitalism**

by Thomas Levenson  
Head of Zeus, 480 pages, £20

In the summer of 1720, shares in the South Sea Company hit their peak – a rise of tenfold – before the bubble burst. The story was recalled in the days of the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s, in the global financial crisis of 2008, and again in the world of Covid-19. When we emerge from the pandemic, how will the state fund the massive rise in public debt?

Now, low interest rates can be ‘locked in’; in the early 18th century, however, the problem was precisely the opposite. The government issued loans with high interest rates, but was not able to pay them off or redeem them without the consent of their creditors. Of course, the creditors had no incentive to surrender an interest rate twice what they could secure elsewhere. The South Sea Company offered a solution to these ‘irredeemables’.

The company had been established in 1711 with a monopoly on trade with Spanish South America – including the right to sell 4,800 slaves a year. A deal was struck with the Royal Africa Company to supply “healthful, sound negroes of all sizes”, but the South Sea Company lacked expertise in the grim business and eventually stepped back from the slave trade in 1720 and 1721. Instead, it concentrated on financial manipulation.

The company’s capital came from holders of government debt who swapped it for equity. The holders of some government bonds were compelled to make the swap. The holders of ‘irredeemables’ could not be forced to make the switch, but many did so voluntarily. The disadvantage of the ‘irredeemables’ was that they could not be sold to secure a capital sum; the advantage of South Sea stock was that it could be bought and sold, as well as promising an even higher rate of return. The government paid a lower rate of



**Game of fools** A print, based on an earlier engraving by William Hogarth, satirising the chaos triggered by the collapse of the South Sea Company. Thomas Levenson’s new book evokes parallels with modern financial crises

## // The share price soared as a result of financial techniques similar to the crisis of 2008. Even Isaac Newton was deceived //

interest to the company, which had a flow of income to finance its activities – and the government reduced the costs of debt service. What could possibly go wrong?

In reality, the share price soared as a result of financial techniques similar to the crisis of 2008, which leads Levenson to argue that the ‘South Sea Bubble’ marked the invention of modern capitalism. Even Isaac Newton was deceived. He swapped his irredeemables close to the top of the market, trading a secure, high return for assets that were about to collapse. Thomas Guy, the London book publisher, was more sensible: he acquired

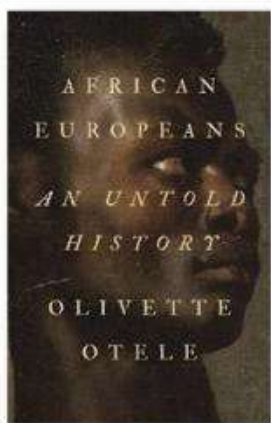
shares below par and sold out before the market hit its peak – and the gains funded his eponymous hospital in Southwark. Today, Guy’s statue outside the hospital is threatened with removal in response to the Black Lives Matter movement – though not, it seems, any statues of Newton.

The company’s involvement with slavery poses a much wider question. As Levenson shows, the scheme was ultimately successful in reducing the costs of government debt and allowing loans on better terms, which helped Britain defeat the French in the endemic conflicts of the 18th century. However, this restructuring of government finance rested on a deal with a company whose initial rationale was the Atlantic slave trade. Levenson explores the murky tale in a wide ranging study of political intrigue, cultural attitudes and – his strength as a historian of science – the emergence of mathematical reasoning about the value of assets. **H**

**Martin Daunton** is emeritus professor of economic history at the University of Cambridge

# Not so new arrivals

**A.S FRANCIS** applauds a dynamic new book charting the long, varied and often overlooked history of Africans in Europe



## **African Europeans: An Untold History**

by Olivette Otele  
Hurst, 288 pages, £20

The long history of interactions between Africa and Europe has been subject to increasing research

efforts by scholars and activists in recent decades. Yet this new publication offers an unusually intimate narration of many African individuals present in various locations and time periods in Europe over the last 2,000 years, from Roman emperors to the migrants of the modern era. As well as demystifying the longstanding and complicated presence of African people in Europe, this book by University of Bristol professor Olivette Otele explains the role that complex intersections of class, skin colour, nationality and gender played in the nuanced experiences of African individuals.

Otele carries out the important work of grappling with how notions of race and racialism have been configured in Europe over the two millennia. She traces the consequence of these developments on how Africans and people of African descent were viewed by society, as well as the impact that these concepts have today. Particular attention is paid to highlighting the agency of Africans who developed various methods to survive, succeed, assimilate or resist Europe's growing dominance on African land and African bodies.

Through studying the stories of these individuals, light is also cast on the many societal changes that have taken place in

European history. This is seen in the different ways that the legacy of third-century martyred soldier St Maurice (who has often been depicted as a black African) has been dealt with by the Catholic church, as well as how African bodies are depicted in European art, and how individuals of African descent navigated European class dynamics.

As well as providing thoughtful insight into how the individuals included were perceived by their European counterparts, Otele also highlights the ways they were recorded by contemporary historians, and the degree to which race played a role in these perceptions. As Otele states, "European views on black Africans in the 15th and 16th centuries were more nuanced than one would assume centuries later" – highlighting how racism has since impacted the way histories of Africans have been written.

The overarching take-aways from *African Europeans* are the way that attitudes towards race have changed through time and the changing face of racism, as well as the central role of Europe's economic and imperialist interests in developing these concepts. Also discussed is the importance of reparative justice in confronting the immeasurable damages done by Europe's ruling circles upon Africa and its people. This is explored in the last chapter, 'Claiming a Past, Navigating the Present', which links the historical with the contemporary, including uplifting overviews of many streams of activism that individuals of African descent are leading today.

It is clear that in writing this book, Otele intended to provide a text that would speak to the ongoing global movement for equality, and liberation from racism in all its forms. Her work confirms the duty of the historian to demonstrate not only how relationships between African and European societies have changed and why, but also what might still yet be changed depending on how we continue to deal with the subject of African histories. *African Europeans* is therefore what every historical work should be, a call for staunch commitment to positive change. **H**

A.S Francis is a historian based at the University of Chichester

**// European views on black Africans in the 15th and 16th centuries were more nuanced than one would assume //**

## FROM FACT TO FICTION

### Caught in a spin

**Suzannah Dunn** on the Tudor turmoil that inspired her new novel, *The Testimony of Alys Twist*

#### **Your novel is set in 1553 – what was happening in England at that time?**

The custodians of boy-king Edward VI persuaded him in his final days to choose a successor other than his Catholic eldest sister, Mary. The king chose Jane Grey, but for the populace – wearied by decades of reform and cynical about the nobles who had benefited – this was unacceptable, and a popular uprising swept Mary to power. She became England's first-ever ruling queen, and there was widespread rejoicing at what was understood as a restoration of justice and common sense. But what started so well in the summer soon unravelled, because Mary had mistaken popular goodwill as a mandate for her mission to restore England to Rome.

#### **Where does your heroine Alys Twist fit into this story?**

Laundress Alys comes to work for the new queen. Laundresses were privy to the intimate lives of their employers; it was hard to hide much from them. Alys is soon sent to work undercover in the laundry of the woman whom the queen increasingly fears as her dangerous rival: her younger half-sister, Elizabeth. Relations between the half-sisters deteriorate and Alys is swept up into Elizabeth's imprisonment in the Tower.

#### **What can you tell us about the royal wardrobe?**

It was one of several storage facilities – along with the departments of 'revels' (costumes and props) and of 'removing beds' (furnishings to follow the court around) – in a square near Blackfriars, between St Paul's Cathedral and the Thames. Here, the sovereign's clothes were repaired and stored in chests packed with 'sweetbags' of herbs, petals and oils. The square still exists today as Wardrobe Place, although the original buildings were lost in the Great Fire.

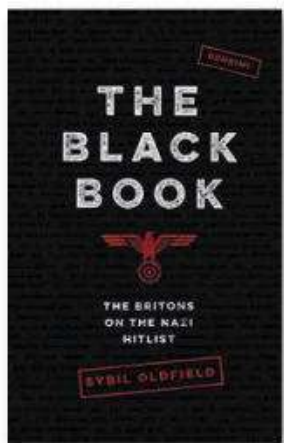
#### **The Testimony of Alys Twist**

by Suzannah Dunn  
(Little, Brown,  
304 pages, £13.99)



# The bureaucracy of evil

**ROBERT HUTTON** on a new book that dissects the diverse list of politicians, refugees and public figures earmarked as prime targets had the Nazi war machine conquered Britain



**The Black Book:  
The Britons on  
the Nazi Hitlist**  
by Sybil Oldfield  
Profile Books, 448 pages, £25

As victorious Allied forces searched the Berlin headquarters of the Gestapo in 1945, they discovered

among the files a remarkable document. Although many parts of the German war machine had been poorly prepared for an invasion of Britain, it turned out that the secret police had in 1940 drawn up a list of 2,619 people it would arrest once it had control of the country.

The official title of this work was the *Sonderfahndungsliste GB* ('Special Search List Great Britain'), but it quickly became known as the 'Black Book'. Many of the people on it were unsurprising. It featured politicians, military personnel and intelligence officers. More than half the people had escaped from Germany or Austria, and many were Jews. But the presence of others on the list was a little harder to explain. Why, for instance, was Virginia Woolf there?

It was this particular question that led the historian Sybil Oldfield to start researching the Black Book. The result is a compilation of the lives that the Nazis so hated and feared, with capsule tales about each name. It is as though someone had compiled an edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* for the year 1940 with the qualification for each entry being that the Nazis hated them.

The life stories are often fascinating, as with the pacifists who came to the conclusion that Hitler must be fought with arms, or moving – especially the tales of those who had fled previously happy lives in Germany with only what they could carry.

To have appeared on the list was a badge of honour, but it didn't mean that the person was much more loved by the British state. Many of the Germans on the list were interned at the start of the war when the government felt overwhelmed by the task of deciding which refugees they could trust.



**Unlikely threats** Social reformers Sidney and Beatrice Webb (pictured here in 1941) were among the 2,619 British residents named in the notorious 'Black Book' – a list of people the Nazis intended to arrest if they invaded

And in other cases, the British government might have found something to agree with in the Nazi view that a person was a trouble-maker. It is probably no shock that the general secretary of the Communist party, Harry Pollitt, appears in the files of both the Gestapo and MI5.

More interesting is Vera Brittain, the author of *Testament of Youth*, who was vilified by her own side during the war for her pacifism and criticising the bombing of

Germany. According to Oldfield, Brittain was relieved to learn she had been a Nazi target, too. Female peace campaigners, the Gestapo had realised, "would be as implacably anti-Nazi as any resistant, armed, British men".

But the thought that recurs looking at the list is: why did the Gestapo bother? Why go to the effort of planning the arrests of art historians, musicologists, novelists and cartoonists, often people in their 70s and 80s? How much of a threat really was the 80-year-old economist Beatrice Webb?

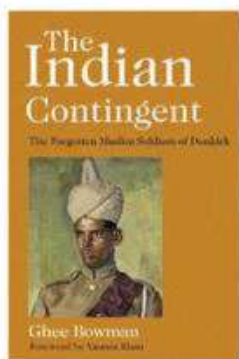
Part of the answer may have been that the bureaucracy of oppression is like other bureaucracies: someone was asked to draw up a list, so they drew one up. But ultimately, it's hard to disagree with Oldfield's conclusion, that those in the Black Book were often there because the very belief in the value of human life was a threat to fascism. **H**

Robert Hutton is the author of *Agent Jack: The True Story of MI5's Secret Nazi Hunter* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2018)

**// To have appeared in the Black Book was a badge of honour, but it didn't mean that the person was much more loved by the British state //**

## WW2

# Hidden figures



## The Indian Contingent: The Forgotten Muslim Soldiers of Dunkirk

by Ghee Bowman

The History Press, 304 pages, £20

The British Indian Army provides largely untapped resources for thinking

about multiculturalism in and beyond the contemporary United Kingdom. In *The Indian Contingent*, Ghee Bowman follows an Indian Army muleteer [mule-driving] unit, Force K6, which arrived in France in December 1939. Widely known in wartime Britain, memory of K6, like much of the empire contribution to the Second World War, was a casualty of the postwar 'England alone' story.

Bowman travels with K6's officers and other ranks from the Punjab to the French countryside, and onwards through England, Wales and Scotland before returning to India in early 1944. K6 attracted media and local interest wherever its companies were billeted,

a trail Bowman mines assiduously for the human side of soldiering. Like the Indian Army authorities, Bowman is particularly interested in religion and food, relaying the efforts of K6's mostly Muslim personnel to remain *halal* and their discovery of Britain's Muslims and mosques.

Some of K6 ended up as prisoners of war in France. A few were recruited into the Wehrmacht's Indian forces, while others escaped. These stories leaven a book that tends towards the sentimental, full of childhood sightings of Indian soldiers and memories of wartime love, not to mention Banyan trees. The vignettes are lively, but a muleteer unit offers only so much scope for narrative in the armed forces and society tradition.

Why, then, does a muleteer unit deserve a history? Bowman's motivation, it seems, is contemporary. That there could have been Indian soldiers at the event constructed in the national imagination as 'Dunkirk' has become unthinkable for parts of contemporary Britain. As he remarks, what is remembered fits the self-image of society.

In her foreword, Yasmin Khan points to Bowman's conviction that public history can challenge racism and transform stereotypes. But Bowman's Muslim soldiers are rather

essentialised – at times exoticised. He comments little on the Indian Army's disciplinary programme of ethnic divide and rule, and is probably too credulous on the *halal* front.

The book's gender politics raise more serious issues, however. Bowman narrates sexual relations with local women under the title of "doing what comes naturally", replete with manly martial race stereotypes, while accounting for an attempted assault by reference to how "lonely" the soldiers were.

In a voice of surprise, Bowman also relates a story of multiracial children growing up in postwar Britain who were not told about their K6 father. Bowman's seeming unawareness of the long tradition of 'family secrets' (to borrow the title of Deborah Cohen's 2013 book) is part of a general lack of scholarly context. Indeed, Cohen began her book with a chapter on the conjugal secrets of British India – a topic with as much potential to upend contemporary Britain's racial order as Bowman's Indians at Dunkirk. **H**

**Tarak Barkawi**, professor of international relations at LSE and author of *Soldiers of Empire* (Cambridge, 2017)

## ANCIENT GREECE

# Rescued from oblivion



## Thebes: The Forgotten City of Ancient Greece

by Paul Cartledge

Pan Macmillan, 336 pages, £25

Poor old Thebes. You'd think it would be enough to secure eternal fame as a city state to have

produced some unique epic poetry and some of the earliest examples of European writing, not to mention bequeathing the world its most famous psychological complex (for, though he realised it a bit late, Oedipus was Theban). But alas, not so.

You can think of Thebes as the Michael Collins of ancient Greece. If you can't remember who Collins is, that's the point. Collins was the third man on Apollo 11, a glittering achievement that should have won him eternal fame and glory. Sadly he happened to be next to two slightly more glittering companions, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, so is all but forgotten.

As with Michael Collins, so with Thebes. Extraordinary in its own right but effortlessly overshadowed by its neighbours, the muscularly glamorous Sparta and impossibly erudite Athens, Thebes has all but slipped from cultural consciousness. Or so it had. In this new book, Paul Cartledge, the former AG Leventis professor of Greek culture at the University of Cambridge, with his usual charm and erudition, fights to "rescue it, permanently, from oblivion".

He makes a persuasive case (and one only mildly undermined by the 'also by' list at the front of the book showing that he first wrote *The Spartans* before lighting on this). One of Thebes' most important roles was cultural.

The Athenians sneeringly liked to call Thebans 'Boeotian swine', but that was bunk.

Not only was Pindar, one of the most sophisticated of Greek poets, Theban, but Theban myths provided Athenian dramatists with some of their best material. Many of

the great 'Athenian' plays, such as *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone*, are in fact about Thebans. Thebes today, argues Cartledge, lives most vigorously as a "city of myth".

Real tragedy, however, rather than the complicated dramatic kind, lay in wait. In 335 BC Alexander the Great ordered the destruction of the entire city. Six thousand Thebans were killed and the entire city was levelled. Or almost. Alexander, it is said, ordered the house of Pindar to be saved out of respect for his verse. It was eerily apposite. The little of Thebes that survived then, and survives now, was preserved through literature alone. **H**

**Catherine Nixey**, author of *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World* (Macmillan, 2017)



Theban myths inspired Athenian plays, such as the stories of Oedipus and Antigone

# Look out for our virtual lecture series

We are hosting a programme of virtual events over the next few months, online and available globally. Wherever you are, tune in to see one of our renowned historians talking about their new book. Each lecture lasts 45 minutes and is followed by a 15-minute Q&A session. You'll also have the opportunity to pre-order a signed copy of the book via independent bookseller Fox Lane Books.



## Mary-Ann Ochota **Secret Britain: Unearthing the Nation's Most Mysterious Archaeology**

Mary-Ann explores the research that has helped us understand so much about Britain's earliest inhabitants. Her talk takes us on a tour of the nation's prehistoric treasures – from mummies found at a house in the Outer Hebrides, to a burial chamber where midsummer sunrise has been observed since 6000 BC.

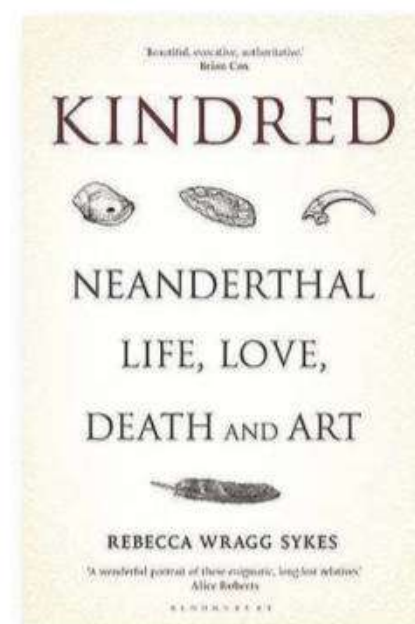
**Thursday 14 January 2021, 7pm**



## Rebecca Wragg Sykes **Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death and Art**

Rebecca reveals what we know now about the Neanderthals, explaining what they were and what they weren't, where their journey starts and finishes, and how far their story intersects with that of *Homo Sapiens*.

**Thursday 28 January 2021, 7pm**



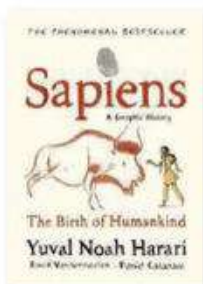
**Tickets cost £10.** Book now at [historyextra.com/events/virtual-lecture](https://www.historyextra.com/events/virtual-lecture)

## VISUAL

**Sapiens: A Graphic History**

by Yuval Noah Harari  
and collaborators

(Harvill Secker, 248 pages, £18.99)

**Graphic content**

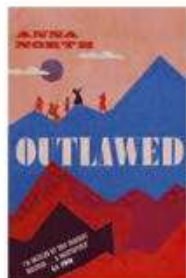
Since it was published in 2011, *Sapiens* has sold more than 10 million copies, providing countless dinner party guests with conversational ammunition. Considering its success, new editions are no surprise – but reworking it as a graphic novel is an unexpected approach. The lively, engaging result transforms humanity’s complex evolutionary story into something accessible enough for anyone to enjoy.

## FICTION

**Outlawed**

by Anna North

(Orion, 272 pages, £14.99)

**On the wild side**

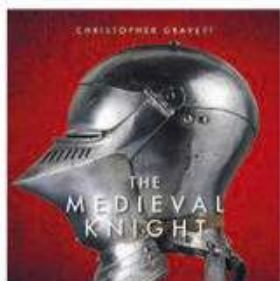
“In the year of our Lord 1894, I became an outlaw” – so declares Anna North’s heroine at the opening of this feminist take on the traditional Western. After failing to conceive, newly wed Ada throws off the shackles of frontier family life to join the Hole in the Wall Gang. But in this bold new imagining of the Wild West, it’s not brooding cowboys living outside of the law, but a band of outcast women.

## MEDIEVAL

**The Medieval Knight**

by Christopher Gravett

(Osprey, 192 pages, £12.99)

**Shining armour**

How did the chivalric code work? What was a knight’s most valuable weapon? And what did you wear under chainmail? This richly illustrated volume from Christopher Gravett – former senior curator at the Royal Armouries – answers all the questions you could have about life as a medieval knight, charting the evolution of knightly practices from the 12th to the 15th century.

## FICTION

**The Smallest Man**

by Frances Quinn

(Simon & Schuster, 384 pages £14.99)

**A big adventure**

To call the life of 17th-century ‘court dwarf’ Jeffrey Hudson ‘unusual’ seems an understatement. After being delivered to Queen Henrietta Maria in a pie, he dazzled the royal court, was banished after a deadly duel and later captured by pirates. Despite being almost too strange for fiction, this story has inspired Frances Quinn’s new novel, in which Hudson is reimagined as a cheery young protagonist, Nat Davy.

## SOCIAL

**Passing: An Alternative History of Identity**

by Lipika Pelham

(C Hurst & Co, 416 pages, £25)

**Being and time**

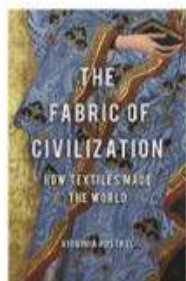
Human beings at once identify and are identified by intersecting characteristics such as race, class, sex and sexuality. But what happens when such identifiers shift? From women navigating patriarchal societies by impersonating men to light-skinned formerly enslaved people claiming white identities and people coming out as queer, these are long histories, with much to say about the present.

## SOCIAL

**The Fabric of Civilization**

by Virginia Postrel

(Basic Books, 320 pages, £22.99)

**Material wealth**

It’s perhaps easy to dismiss the study of fabrics as merely light and decorative, a pleasing social-history diversion – but this book makes a strong case for its key role in the human story. And, from trade to technology, medicine to ‘microfibres’, the development of textiles, and the very process of developing them, has powered societal evolution since the Stone Age.

## ANCIENT

**Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths**

by Natalie Haynes

(Picador, 310 pages, £20)

**Female folklore**

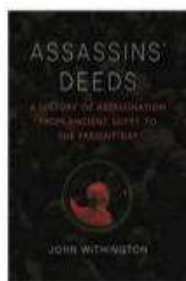
Medusa, with the snakes for hair; Helen of Troy, whose abduction sparked war; Pandora, whose curiosity unleashed countless evils into the world. Greek mythology is replete with women whose stories we think we know, but which this book argues have shapeshifted far from their original forms. Exploring the ways such tales have been told and retold, this is a fascinating look at myths and their role in society.

## POLITICAL

**Assassins’ Deeds**

by John Withington

(Reaktion Books, 368 pages, £18)

**Dead famous**

Death has long stalked the halls of power, and this overview of the murders of the famous and important stretches back to the ancient world. Exploring what such killings tell us about the society and politics of each era, it offers a litany of humanity’s darker sides – ambition, greed, and lust for control. Studded with necessarily grisly case studies, it’s leavened by a final section on those who got away. **H**

# ENCOUNTERS

## 88 **DIARY:** LISTEN & WATCH

By Jonathan Wright and Matt Elton

## 92 **WE RECOMMEND:** Our picks of 2020

### Behind the curtain

*The Great* takes the experiences of the young Catherine the Great (played by Elle Fanning, above left) as inspiration for a comedic look at life and love in the Russian court



#### WATCH

### Courtly intrigue

Don't expect *The Great* to be unduly concerned with strict historical accuracy. Instead, Tony McNamara's US-made hit comedy is, to quote its opening credits, "an occasionally true story" that takes the life of the young Catherine the Great as a starting point – and then gleefully runs with the idea of an unworldly young woman contending with a spoilt and entitled husband. It may help to know that McNamara also co-wrote the script to *The Favourite*, which similarly made merry with the past.

Elle Fanning plays Catherine as a well-connected yet relatively impoverished young woman blessed with a breezy confidence. "I am to be empress of Russia," she says when we first meet her, "isn't that so completely *right*?"

But Catherine's bubbly personality and romantic nature are sorely tested when she's betrothed to Peter III (Nicholas Hoult). The Russian court, she discovers, is backwards and filled with all manner of strange customs. As for her husband, he's an egomaniac given to rude outbursts, such as his assessment of Catherine's love of education: "Women are for seeding, not reading."

Soon, you're rooting for Catherine to overthrow Peter because it's the least he deserves, which is of course the point. A series as anachronistic as *Blackadder*, and in its way just as much fun.

#### The Great

Channel 4 / January



## WATCH

## A life in the movies

While he enjoyed huge success as a screenwriter, including winning an Academy Award for *Citizen Kane*, Herman J Mankiewicz often cut an unhappy figure. He had issues with alcohol and gambling and died in 1953 at the relatively young age of 55.

It's a biographical outline that David Fincher uses, sometimes loosely and working from a script by his late father, Jack, in a drama that's equal parts fever-dream and paean to Hollywood's Golden Age.

Gary Oldman (right) is great as Mankiewicz. There are also strong turns from Tuppence Middleton as his long-suffering wife, Sara, and Charles Dance as monstrous publisher William Randolph Hearst, widely supposed to be the model for Kane.

## Mank

Netflix / Streaming now



Cameramen film US athlete Archie Williams at the 1936 Olympic Games – the subject of a PBS documentary

## WATCH

## Trailblazing competitors

The 1936 Olympics are widely remembered for the achievements of US athlete Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals at the games. But we should remember that Owens was just one of 18 black American athletes who, at a time when the Jim Crow system still held sway in the American South, competed in Berlin.

A fine documentary from Deborah Riley Draper focuses on the other 17 (15 men and two women) athletes, including Archie Williams, who won

gold in the 400 metres. There are interviews with many of the athletes, as well as sometimes eerie archive footage. The wider story here is of men and women whose achievements went far beyond collectively embarrassing Hitler by challenging the Nazi myth of Aryan supremacy, but whose very presence laid down a marker for future activists.

## Olympic Pride, American Prejudice

PBS America / Friday 15 January



Dante as depicted in a 1465 painting by Domenico di Michelino. A new radio series explores the legacy of his *Divine Comedy*

## LISTEN

## Dispatches from the afterlife

Born in c1265 in Florence, Dante Alighieri was a poet and philosopher who, unusually in Italy at the time, chose to write in the Tuscan vernacular rather than in Latin. This opened up his verse to the widest possible audience – and considering that his works included the *Divine Comedy*, arguably the greatest literary work in the European canon and certainly one of the most influential, this was quite some gift to the world.

Written between c1308 and 1320, the poem is divided into three sections, as its author imagines travelling through *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. As such, it's a text strongly rooted in the medieval worldview, and the idea that heaven, purgatory or hell await us all. But seven centuries after Dante's death, does it have any relevance to 21st-century life?

Yes, says Katya Adler, BBC's Europe editor, as she offers 21 reasons – seven for each destination in the afterlife – why listeners might want to read Dante today, in a three-part radio series. Along the way, she looks at what Dante has to say on the subjects of populist politicians, dishonest bankers and our stewardship of the environment. Adler also explores Dante's influence on videogaming and his interest in the smile, which turns out to be surprisingly important within wider western culture.

## Dante 2021

Radio 4 / January



Jenna Coleman and Tahar Rahim star in a new drama based on the murders of serial killer Charles Sobhraj

## WATCH

### Charismatic killer

In 1975, fraudster Charles Sobhraj committed his first known murder. By 1976, when he was imprisoned in New Delhi, he had killed at least a dozen times. Aided by his girlfriend, Quebecois medical secretary Marie-Andrée Leclerc, his targets were tourists, primarily young backpackers travelling the Hippie Trail through south-east Asia.

What kind of person was Sobhraj? Why did he prey on people with so little? And how did his murder spree come to light? Produced for the BBC by Mammoth Screen, the company behind *Victoria* and *World On Fire*, new drama series *The Serpent* wrestles with these questions by following Sobhraj's story and the detective work of the man who exposed his crimes, Herman Knippenberg (Billy Howle), a junior diplomat at the Dutch embassy in Bangkok.

*The Serpent* plays out as an atmospheric cat-and-mouse thriller that, as we watch Sobhraj ungluing photos from passports and replacing them with images of himself, could only have taken place in a pre-digital age. It's also a drama that has much to say about identity, class and, reflecting how the spirit of the 1960s lingered into the next decade, the dangers of naive idealism.

French actor Tahar Rahim portrays Sobhraj as a charmer who possesses a chilling disregard for those he interacts with, while Jenna Coleman plays Leclerc as dangerously in thrall to her partner in crime.

#### The Serpent

BBC One / Begins Friday 1 January

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# HISTORY ON THE AIRWAVES

"The 'medicine' was the government advice to farmers fed into the series, and the 'sugar' was the human drama"



*The Archers*, Radio 4's long-running 'everyday story of country folk', is turning 70. Social historian **DAVID KYNASTON** tells us about his new documentary exploring how the drama has reflected real-life issues

#### What was the thinking behind *The Archers* when it first launched?

British agriculture was in a poor way between the wars, so the authorities wanted to put it on a sound economic footing. In the context of postwar austerity, there was also a desire to be able to supply cheap food to urban consumers rather than having to rely on imports. It's like that line from *Mary Poppins*: "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down." The 'medicine' was the advice to farmers being fed into the series by the government. The 'sugar' was the human drama around it.

#### Early writers Geoffrey Webb and Edward J Mason had worked on [thriller serial] *Dick Barton – Special Agent*. Did that inform the show's direction?

Yes, the idea was basically a farming *Dick Barton*! Over the first half of its history, up until the 1980s, it mixed agricultural advice and melodrama, of which the most famous example was in 1955 when Grace Archer died in a fire on the same day commercial TV launched in London.

Later, it started to deal more with social issues. A good example was a storyline in which Peggy Archer's second husband, Jack Woolley, got dementia, which was followed over several years, reflecting how that situation might be in real life. Since the 1990s, the programme has grown in what you might call emotional intelligence. The culmination of that was a story involving Helen and Rob Titchener, which opened people's eyes to the problem of coercive control.

#### *The Archers* has a reputation as a middle-class soap. Is that true?

It actually had a predominantly working-class audience at the start, but

[Britain was] a predominantly working-class society in the 1950s and 1960s, and we forget how long that remained the case. As for the characters, there was a strict social hierarchy in Ambridge for many years. The Archer family were treated deferentially, and others were definitely bottom of the pile. There's now more social mobility, but there are still class tensions.

#### How has the show's treatment of agriculture changed?

There was a very important book in the 1960s, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, about the effects of pesticides. *The Archers* missed that. It wasn't until much later that the series reflected broader debates around agriculture. Early on, it completely followed the government line – that the future lay with big farms and that smallholdings were wasting space. **H**

Archive on 4: A Social History of the *Archers* is scheduled for Saturday 2 January



Cast members of *The Archers* pictured in 1951. A new documentary marks the radio serial's 70th birthday

## Our top picks of 2020



**Rhiannon Davies**

Tuning in to Dominic Sandbrook and Tom Holland's new podcast, **The Rest is History**, during the latest lockdown has offered a great window of escape from the humdrum of hand sanitiser and endless quiet nights in. With Sandbrook's speciality being modern history and Holland taking charge of all things ancient, the two perspectives mesh together to offer fascinating insights on both the past and the present. The pair grapple with big historical questions, such as what makes a figure 'great', while still finding plenty of time to amble down historical rabbit holes, including discussions of whether they would have fancied themselves as roundheads or royalists in another life.

Heading across the Atlantic, meanwhile, Grayson Perry's **Big American Road Trip** (All 4) delves into the issues that continue to split US society. From documenting the experiences of generations of one wealthy African-American family to an awkward encounter with educated east coast liberals who bristle at the term 'elite', the artist explores what he sees as the twin thorns embedded in America's side: race and class.



Finally, **Mangrove** (BBC iPlayer), from Steve McQueen's Small Axe series of films, also shines a light on black history – but here the issues are closer to home. Following the (literal) trials and tribulations of a group of real-life activists dubbed the 'Mangrove Nine' who protested their ill-treatment at the hands of racist Metropolitan police officers in 1970, it's deeply affecting. Its cast (including Malachi Kirby, above, as campaigner Darcus Howe) is exemplary, while its soundtrack is particularly deserving of mention, from a joyous selection of ska tracks to a courtroom score deliberately designed to unsettle.



**Susanne Frank**

The four-part series **Enslaved with Samuel L Jackson** (BBC iPlayer) shines light on the myriad of stories of the transatlantic slave trade. The Atlantic is exposed as both a graveyard and a crime scene as we follow the divers of Diving With Purpose, who recover evidence such as a single elephant tusk pointing to the ivory trade. They also search the ocean floor for clues of the fight against slave owners and of the Freedom Ships that were part of the Underground Railroad. This 'treasure hunt' aspect might seem at odds with the harrowing stories, but for me, it made it more bearable to watch.

**Berlin 1945** (BBC iPlayer) was also not easy viewing. This collage of diary entries is illustrated with photographs and film scenes that stayed in my mind for days afterwards. Through the eyes and voices of ordinary people, we see war's brutality – bombing raids, hunger, rape – juxtaposed with the seeming ordinariness of daily life: cinema visits and going to work amid the ruins. There is 18-year-old clerk, Brigitte; a Polish forced-labourer; and a Jewish woman living in hiding who's hoping, against the odds, to see her children again. Each is changed by the horrors they witness.

Finally, if, like me, you were initially put off by the premise of the film **Jojo Rabbit** (available via download and streaming services) I urge you to give it a try. Taika Waititi's skilful touch injects gentle warmth and humour into this Nazi-era story about growing up in adversity. He highlights the absurd and grotesque nature of the regime – but hope and humanity triumph.



**Laughing at the darkness** Sam Rockwell, Scarlett Johansson and Roman Griffin Davis star in *Jojo Rabbit*, a sideways look at the horrors of Nazi Germany



**Matt Elton**

Although stylistically very different, two historical dramas released this year serve as reminders of the ways in which the lives of generations of people have been warped and stunted by prejudice. **The Boys in the Band** (Netflix) focuses on a group of gay men in 1960s New York who gather for a birthday party hosted by Michael (Matt Bomer) is undergoing psychoanalysis and has moved away from the city and its homosexual 'lifestyle'; Harold (Zachary Quinto) is losing his youthful looks; and Hank and Larry are having relationship problems. Tensions rise when Michael's former university roommate arrives unexpectedly and are exacerbated by a particularly fraught 'party game'. Soon, issues of external and internalised homophobia float to the surface.

Based on Mart Crowley's 1968 play, and featuring the (entirely openly gay) cast of the 2018 Broadway revival, it's sometimes difficult viewing. The party game is tinged with cruelty; its flawed participants use insensitive, coarse language; and, while amusing, the barbs they aim at each other are designed to wound ("if we could just not hate ourselves so much", Michael bemoans at one point). But as a study of a particular point in time and an exploration of how far we've come, it's fascinating.

I, too, was compelled by Steve McQueen's Small Axe series, particularly **Red, White and Blue** (BBC iPlayer). Set in the 1980s and based on a true story, it stars John Boyega as Leroy Logan, a young black man who joins the police despite and because of the fact that his father is assaulted by racist officers. His efforts to reform the service from within are met with opposition from all sides, not least from his father. Boyega and McQueen poignantly capture both the loneliness of Logan's position and the challenge of facing prejudice when positive change is far from guaranteed.





**Motorcycle diaries** Artist Grayson Perry cuts a typically flamboyant figure as he chronicles his journey across the US in his *Big American Road Trip*



**Pride and prejudice** *The Boys in the Band*, a 21st-century adaptation of a 1960s play, looks at the lives, loves and loathing of a group of gay men



**Courtroom drama** Sacha Baron Cohen (left) in *The Trial of the Chicago 7*, which dramatises a court case that highlighted tensions in late 1960s America



## Rachel Dickens

Based on Alex Kershaw's 2012 nonfiction account, animated miniseries **The Liberator** (Netflix) follows the journey of a Second World War Allied regiment comprising Native Americans, Mexicans and white cowboys from a military prison. At the time, these men weren't allowed to drink in the same bar together, yet they fought heroically through Nazi-occupied Europe, starting at Sicily in 1943. While its innovative animation technique, blending live-action actors with CGI, may not be for everyone, the character-led drama and fight scenes remain gripping. It's all held together by the character of Felix Sparks (Bradley James), a maverick whose career the series follows until the war's end.

Another Netflix offering, **The Trial of the Chicago 7**, dramatises the legal proceedings brought against a group of anti-Vietnam War protesters charged with conspiracy after violence broke out at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The titular seven are played by famous faces including Eddie Redmayne and Sacha Baron Cohen in this film written and directed by Aaron Sorkin, perhaps most famous for 2010's *The Social Network* and TV series *The West Wing*. As the trial unfolds, the twin spectres of racism and government interference

begin to hang increasingly heavy over events – exemplified perhaps most shockingly in the treatment of Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) who is removed from the courtroom, beaten, and returned gagged and chained.

### Battle lines

A scene from Netflix drama *The Liberator*, which combines live-action footage with animation to tell the real story of a Second World War regiment



## Ellie Cawthorne

Trying to wrangle with the geopolitics of the Iraq War is enough to give anyone a headache. But the involving documentary **Once Upon a Time in Iraq** (BBC iPlayer) strips back the politics to tell the story of how the conflict unfolded on the ground – as seen by those who were there. We meet US soldiers who have lost their bluster, jaded international journalists and painfully stoic Iraqi civilians. Each story is uniquely horrifying and deeply affecting in equal measure. Like watching a car crash in slow motion, this is heart-thumping stuff.

Moving from chalk to cheese, I loved the monstrously bewigged bodice-ripping escapades of **Harlots** (BBC iPlayer). Newly released on the BBC this year, this hefty wedge of East End escapism follows the exploits of 18th-century London's sex workers (including Lucy Wells, played by Eloise Smyth, right). It's gleefully bawdy, filled with foul-mouthed cockney soundbites worthy of an ancestor of Danny Dyer. But behind the fish-market hollering, it's refreshing to see a period drama stripped of fussy pretention that presents such a wide range of female characters and experiences.

Over on BBC Radio 4, the premise of **The Wedding Detectives** (BBC Sounds) intrigued me instantly. This gentle meander through family history sees Charlotte Sibtain and Cole Moreton uncover the stories behind discarded wedding photos found in car boots, old attics or on eBay. Starting with a picture of a high society bash from 1959, episode one leads us down an unexpected path toward crumbling stately homes, infidelity and even murder. As it turns out, a big white wedding doesn't always mean happily ever after. **H**



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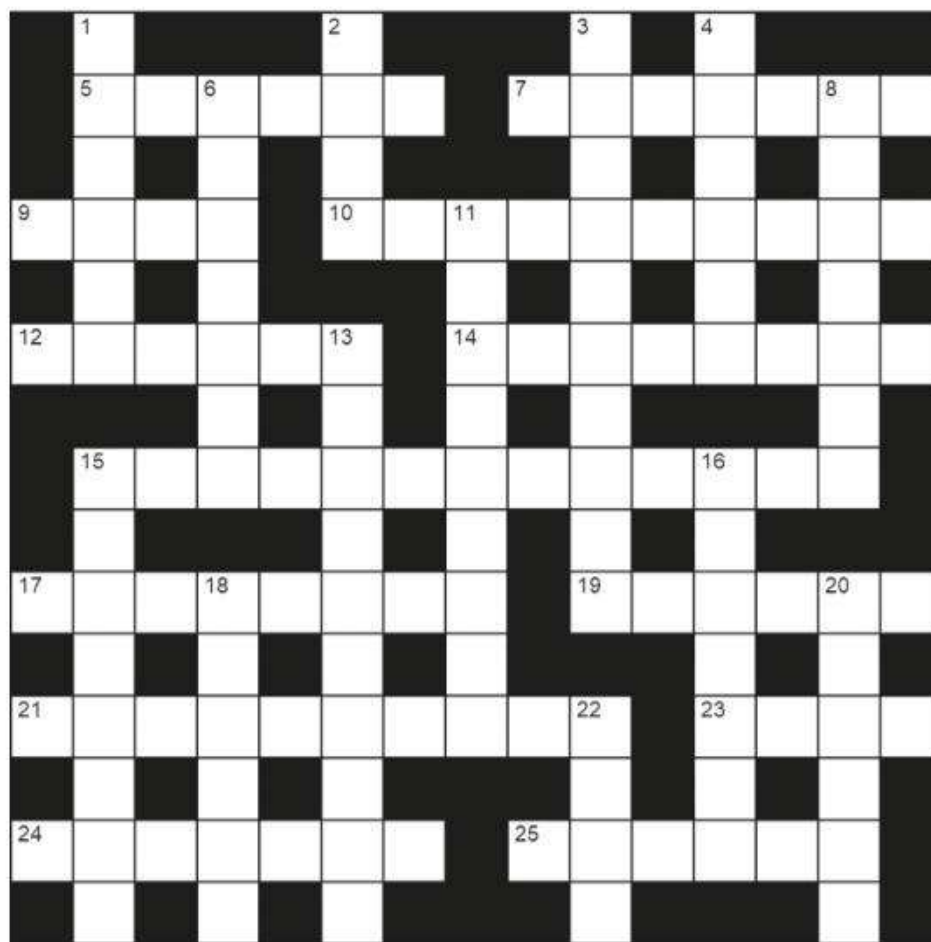
# PRIZE CROSSWORD

## Across

- 5** Italian-born theologian who proposed a proof of God's existence; also archbishop of Canterbury during William the Conqueror's reign (6)  
**7** Maria \_\_\_\_, influential Hapsburg ruler whose coming to power triggered the War of Austrian Succession (7)  
**9/3 down** Her 1960s Clean Up TV Campaign had only minor success, but her tireless persistence made her a prominent figure, possibly a 'national institution' in Britain (4,10)  
**10** In heraldry, a shield-shape used eg in a coat of arms (10)  
**12** Arras was the capital of this historical region, mainly present-day Pas-de-Calais (6)  
**14** A major palace of Moorish Spain (name derives from 'the red' in Arabic) (8)  
**15** American woman who escaped slavery and, during the 1850s, led many other slaves to freedom via the Underground Railroad secret network (7,6)  
**17** Portsmouth greengrocer who made a solo round-the-world voyage in his yacht, *Lively Lady*, in 1967–68 (4,4)  
**19** 'St \_\_\_\_ the Martyr', ninth-century king of East Anglia (6)  
**21** She gave up a successful Hollywood career when she married a European prince in 1956 (5,5)  
**23/1 down** Austrian-born US film star, often typecast as a femme fatale, who later achieved recognition as the co-inventor of a radio transmission system (4,6)  
**24** First World War fighter pilot ace who became one of the most powerful leaders in the Nazi party (7)  
**25** Hoa Lo \_\_\_\_ was known, ironically, as the 'Hanoi Hilton' during the Vietnam War (6)

## Down

- 1** See 23 across  
**2** Colour of the uniform worn by Union soldiers in the American Civil War (4)  
**3** See 9 across  
**4** Dutch town, and scene, in September 1944, of a failed attempt by US, British and Polish forces to secure the Rhine bridges (6)  
**6** Thomas \_\_\_\_, whose political intrigues and attempts to control the young Edward VI led to his execution in 1549 (7)  
**8** A traditional accessory of Scottish Highland male dress, probably a survival of the medieval belt purse (7)  
**11** Kent country house, owned by the National Trust, and the residence of Winston Churchill for more than 40 years (9)  
**13** Nickname of William IV



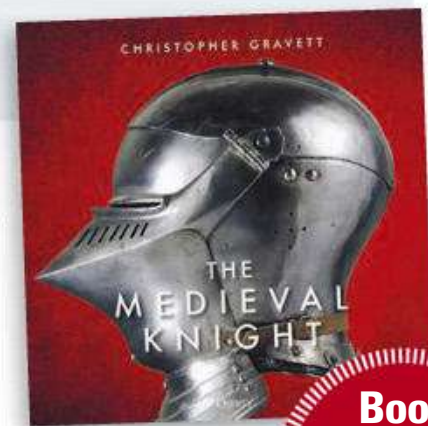
Where in Scotland is this abbey, where Mary, Queen of Scots once lived? (see 15 down)

- of Great Britain, who formed an early friendship with Nelson (6,4)  
**15** Scottish location of 12th-century abbey, and later a palace, once the residence of Mary, Queen of Scots (8)  
**16** Ancient Egyptian capital, founded by, according to tradition, Menes, the first king of the unified country (7)  
**18** First-century BC Roman statesman and orator, staunch upholder (in vain) of republican principles (6)  
**20** The temple complex at Lydney Park, Gloucestershire was dedicated to this Celtic god, also known as Nuada (6)

- 22** First name of the cosmonaut who was the first person to travel into outer space (4)

Compiled by **Eddie James**

Who is this film star and inventor? (see 23 across/1 down)



## The Medieval Knight

By **Christopher Gravett**

Christopher Gravett, former senior curator at the Royal Armouries, delves into the world of medieval knights in this richly illustrated book. It describes the wars knights fought, the weapons they wielded, the armour they wore, and their fascinating code and mythology of chivalry.

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## Solution to our December 2020 crossword

**Across** 6 Harlow 8/24 Archduke Ferdinand 10 Notre-Dame  
 11 Cyrus 12 Impis 14 Stannary 15 The Trung Sisters 19 Stamp Act  
 21 Wolfe 23 Boris 26 Michelet 27 Iberia  
**Down** 1 Writ 2 Ortega 3 Chicanos 4 Currer Bell 5/7 Jesse Owens  
 6 Hengist 9 Sarsen 13 Puerto Rico 16 Ramesses 17 Satire  
 18 Steedman 20 Alfred 21 Whitby 22 H-bomb 25 Agra

## Four winners of *Most Notorious Pirates*

CJ Deacy, Greater Manchester; N Jones, Somerset;  
 E Savage, County Down; M Lawson, Greater Manchester

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# NEXT MONTH

February issue on sale 21 January 2021

## Sutton Hoo

Martin Carver on the astonishing treasures that were unearthed on the eve of the Second World War



## A miraculous transformation

Lauren Johnson seeks to explain the cult that grew up around one of England's least successful kings – Henry VI

## Dissolution

Hugh Willmott says we need to rethink the story of Henry VIII's attack on England's monasteries



## Killer fashion

Malcolm Smith explores the devastating consequences of the Victorian obsession with feathered hats

# MY HISTORY HERO

Simon Farnaby, actor, writer and comedian, chooses

## Félix Kir

1876–1968



Simon Farnaby's acting credits include the BBC series *Horrible Histories*, *Detectorists* and *Ghosts* (currently on BBC iPlayer). His first book for children, *The Wizard in My Shed*, was published by Hodder in October 2020



Félix Kir in 1947, when he was the mayor of Dijon. He was elected mayor of the city on five occasions and died at the ripe old age of 92, while still in office

### IN PROFILE

**Félix Kir was a Catholic priest who supported the French Resistance in the Second World War. After helping 5,000 PoWs escape German captivity, he was sentenced to death, but managed to secure his release. After the war, he was elected mayor of Dijon several times and served in the national parliament. He is also famous for popularising the cocktail that bears his name.**

**//** As a man of God, Kir could have chosen not to get involved. But he had a strong sense of morality, and that put him in grave danger **//**

### When did you first hear about Félix Kir?

A few years ago I wrote a book about Maurice Flitcroft, a crane driver from Barrow who entered the 1976 British Open golf championship. I like strange characters with peculiar stories, and so when I read about Félix Kir in a newspaper a little while back, he instantly appealed to me. He was this clergyman who did extraordinary things.

### What was Kir's finest hour?

That has to be the role he played in supporting the French Resistance during the Second World War – most particularly, in helping 5,000 PoWs escape a Nazi camp at Longvic in the Côte-d'Or. He procured their release on the pretence that they would be used as slave labour for the German regime. In short, he totally hoodwinked the Nazis.

### What made him a hero?

As a man of God – he was a priest in the commune of Auxonne, near Dijon – Kir could easily have chosen not to get involved. But he had a strong sense of morality. And that morality put him in grave danger. After liberating the PoWs, he was arrested and sentenced to death – but was somehow able to secure his release. Then, in 1944, members of a Vichy militia tried to assassinate him, wounding him in the arm and the leg and forcing him into hiding.

### What sort of character was he?

He was a bit of a showman. There's even a drink that's named after him, the Kir. He popularised this cocktail – in fact, some say he created it – which is made by mixing white wine with crème de cassis in order to turn the drink red. I must admit that I've had a few of them in my time!

And there's also a story (quite possibly apocryphal) that, when Dijon was liberated in 1944, he was seen standing on a tank waving to the crowds. This, so the story goes, upset Charles de Gaulle, who was worried that Kir was attempting to steal the limelight. Even if this tale isn't true, it gives us a flavour of Kir's larger-than-life personality. That personality must have struck a chord with the people of Dijon, as he was elected mayor of the city five times and died while still in office, at the age of 92.

### Do you see any parallels between your life and Kir's?

I don't like being told what to do, and I like to stand up for the little guy. But would I do that in such extreme circumstances as Kir? I'd like to think so, but I'm not sure.

### Finally, if you could meet Kir, what would you ask him?

How do you see the role of God in war? You experienced some terrible things during that conflict – did that make you question your faith? **H**

Simon Farnaby was talking to Spencer Mizen

### LISTEN

In Radio 4's *Great Lives*, guests choose inspirational figures: [bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qxsb](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qxsb)



# Thank you, Sylvia

## Sylvia left a gift in her Will to help conquer Stroke

The first we knew of Sylvia was when we received notification of the gift she'd left us in her Will. Shortly after, a beautiful story of a much-loved woman began to unfurl.

Friends remembered Sylvia's kind-heart and her wish to help others. She spent part of her adult-life caring for her mother, and developed a passion

for medicine. Becoming a medical secretary was her next step and, in the course of her career, she discovered the devastating impact a stroke could have on people and their families. She saw that research and treatment were vastly under-funded, and she decided to remember the Stroke Association in her Will.

Sylvia's gift has helped fund our work to conquer stroke. She's supported research to prevent and treat stroke, and she's helped care for survivors. And that's something you can do too – in the same way.

**If you would like to learn more about remembering the Stroke Association in your Will, please get in touch.**

**Call 020 75661505 email [legacy@stroke.org.uk](mailto:legacy@stroke.org.uk)  
or visit [stroke.org.uk/legacy](http://stroke.org.uk/legacy)**

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**Stroke**  
association

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